Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

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Interviewee: Verlin Williams
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BB: But first what I have to do is read this statement, so you know what I’m doing, which you pretty much already know. 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?

VW: Yes I have.

BB: Ok, ready to roll. I like to start out, will you just tell me your name, where you’re from, and when you were born.

VW: I’m Verlin Williams and I was born January 3rd 1947, in Monroe County.

BB: Ok, I guess the first question I’ll start out with is do you have any first hand memories of the American chestnut?

VW: Yes I do. When I was age 5 there were 2 large chestnut trees just above the bean patch at our house, that were still producing chestnuts at that time. And when I was probably 17, 1963, the last chestnut tree in the community here where I live now died. We went up there and it was dead that year in ’63, we harvested chestnuts off of in ’62.

BB: Was that a tree you visited every year?

VW: yah, most every year. All of the neighborhood boys, they knew where all the chestnut trees were. Come fall, up the hill to get the chestnuts. It was a routine for the young farm boys.

BB: so, when you said the community, so where do you live now in relation to where you grew up?

VW: 50 miles maybe now

BB: so where did you grow up?

VW: at Monroe County, between Sweetwater and Madisonville.

BB: Are most of your memories of that place where you grew up, or this place?

VW: I’ve got memories of both, most of them here because I’ve lived most of my life here. Back in those days, we didn’t have much else to do on the weekends except run up and down the ridges. We knew where ever tree was that bore nuts.

BB: so was it more a thing that boys would do together?

VW: oh yeah, we did it all the time. We hunted all the time too. It was just something we all knew, and something we all did.
BB: But girls wouldn’t really go chestnut hunting?

VW: No, not in those days. They stayed home.

BB: Do you remember any of your relatives telling you anything about chestnuts?

VW: Oh yeah, my Dad, he knew quite a bit about it. Of course, he grew up in the mountainous area of Monroe County, Starrs Mountain. He remembers, you know the chestnut real well, he remembers them dying. You know, the chestnut wood, strange thing about it, all the old moonshiners, that was what they fired their stills with was chestnut wood. Chestnut wood does not put off smoke much, very small amount of smoke. So they used the dead chestnut wood to fire their stills with so the revenuers wouldn’t see the smoke. They all did it.

BB: I’ve not heard that before, that’s really neat.

VW: Yeah, and they also used it in their cooking stoves which was wood back then, simply because it put off very little smoke. They went to get their wood for the winter and all, they cut the chestnut, they used it for their cooking stove. Mostly because it didn’t smoke much.

BB: was your Dad a moonshiner?

VW: During the Depression, he did a little bit. I think he quit right after the Depression. Him and his brother did a little bit during the Depression, of course there was no other way to make a living back in those Mountains, and that was one of the commodities you could take across the mountain to Etowah. And you could always sell it. He probably didn’t make more than, I’d say somebody said, ... I think he said one time that his still was like a 35 gallon one. But you know, the days of the Depression, those stories, they stick with you if you really listen to these people and how they struggled. He traded 2 pigs to buy the copper to build the still that a guy swiped off of a train car in the Etowah rail yard. This was how that came about. [laughs] But they survived, it was what it took to survive in those days. Because there was nothing else.

BB: That’s really interesting, that’s a great story. So you do remember seeing some wild chestnuts growing, you said you remembered the one...

VW: Probably on the East ridge. I’ve never saw any on the West Ridge. But on the East ridge over here, there’s probably still some that keeps sprouting back. You know they’ll die and they’ll sprout back and get almost big enough to produce chestnuts, and then they’ll die back again. Now, up until the middle, I guess mid ‘70s, there was some trees over just on the other side of the schoolhouse, up on that top, that were probably 3 inches in diameter. They’ve probably long since died out and the sprouts are coming back again. But I haven’t been on that ridge there now, in years, I guess 15 years or so, so I don’t know if that’s still occurring or not.

BB: I have some kind of specific questions about how chestnuts were used. And if you have heard anything about this from your family or your experience and if you haven’t, that’s fine too. Did you ever hear about anybody ever selling or trading chestnuts?

VW: No, not much, everybody seemed to gather them, they gathered them for their own use, cause they were mostly sustenance people back in those mountains. They ate a lot of boiled chestnuts. And you know, as the
chestnuts in the wintertime, as it dries it gets hard, and I’ve heard when they couldn’t get flour or meal, they would actually pound those chestnuts up into flour and made biscuits out of them. Never ate one of them, but they were probably pretty good. You know, the Indians did that with acorns.

BB: they did that with chestnut too, the Cherokee did.

VW: yeah, they did that with Acorn too. But they like, boiled them, and get he alkaline out of them, they did that with acorns too.

BB: So did you eat chestnuts, and how would you eat them?

VW: Oh yeah, we... well until, like when you first gather them their really sweet, really juicy, really soft. We ate them raw then. But when what we had collected started to dry more and got a little harder, they would boil them. And it would bring them back to life. If you’ve never ate any boiled chestnuts they’re good. They are, they’re really good.

BB: Did you, so you mentioned that you heard sometimes that people would grind them down into flour, did you ever hear about any other ways people would eat them that you can recall?

VW: no, but, I know, back then they let their livestock run loose. People built fences back in Daddy’s day, when he was growing up and all, they built fences to keep livestock out of the fields they didn’t want them in, they didn’t build fences to keep them in. So all the hogs and stuff ran loose in the mountains. And they could tell how their pork crop was going to be when they did have the hog killing in the fall, by how many chestnuts there was. If there was lots of chestnuts, the hogs were going to be really fat. Of course, what they didn’t realize too is that when there’s a lot of chestnuts there’s also a lot of acorns and stuff. So the mast crop is good all the way around, so therefore when they went to round the hogs up and slaughter them in for winter they knew they were going to have some in prime shape. And they kind of gauged those by the chestnuts.

BB: Did you ever hear of any other livestock animals fed on chestnuts?

VW: No, but I know deer loves them They really like them. And turkeys really love them.

BB: How would you harvest and store the nuts?

VW: They basically, back then, when they fall they fall out of the burr, the burr stays on the tree longest. Back then you took a big flour sack, cause everybody had big families, you bought flour in a 25 pound bags, they come in a cloth sack. They took part of the sacks and they made girls in the family dresses out of them, and they made, I think I’ve still got one of Mother’s old quilts that’s lined with White Lilly flour sacks, and you can still read some of the print on it. They sewed them together, made quilt lining out of them. You’d just take one of those and head to the chestnut tree and pick up chestnuts all day, until you got your sack full and head home. Mostly just sit in the corner somewhere. If they lasted that long, most families were big and everybody was eating out of them, so you had to pick up quite a few for them to last very long you had to get quite a few of them. Same way with hickory nuts, it was a tradition every fall, you know, every kid in the neighborhood knew where the best hickory nut trees was. And I can still show you the best hickory nuts in Tennessee. And they are on Bendabout Farms, and there are no others like them. You won’t find them anywhere else, I have never seen any more trees like these.
BB: I’ve never had a hickory nut before.

VW: There are three trees, four trees together right down here off the creek. That has a hickory nut on it, one of them has a round hickory nut, real thin shelled, real large meat’s inside. You want right over from it and there’s two trees that has a long hickory nut about an inch long, they will get that long, and they’re flat, they’re really good. And then right out from it there there’s another one that’s kind of oblong and has a tang on both ends. You ever see a hickory nut with the blossom end tang, but on the other end it’s got another tang that’s flat? Daddy always said that God made that hickory nut so the little rodents like the chipmunks could pick it up and carry it better. You know, I don’t know. It made sense back when I was a young boy. It made sense when I was a young lad, because, you know, because it’s got a tang on

And another thing, the way they used to gather chestnuts, the way he used to gather them, back when maybe I was 5 years old, we’d always make a pilgrimage back to the Mountains you know, during apple time, and get apples off of the old wild apple trees that’s grow on the old homesteads. Mountains were full of them, we’d get apples, we’d go back for the muscadines when they’d get ripe in the fall, and we’d go back for the chestnuts. Well, Daddy, he would take his axe and a flour sack, the chestnuts are long gone. I remember one time asking him, ‘the chestnuts are gone’ because the chestnut trees above the house where we lived, I knew they were gone, and he said ‘I’ll show you how to get chestnuts son’. He goes up, finds a big chestnut tree, he looks around until he finds a hole in a tree, a hollow tree, up about 8 or 10 feet high, and it was worn real slick around it, where something had been going in and out a lot. He thumped the tree with his axe handle until he found out how far down the hollow went. He chopped a hole in it, pulled the chestnut hulls from the year before out of the bottom, hold the sack under there and let all those chestnuts that all of the chipmunks had stored fall out into that sack. When his sack got full he put a plug in it. He always plugged the hole back up so they could fill it back up next year. But he never would completely empty any one tree. But, they’re already stored, so when they take them up and drop them in, you know, they’ve got the burr on the blossom end, those chestnuts they clip that burr off and drop them in, that way another chipmunk can’t get a hold of it and carry it back out. That’s how the small rodents like the chipmunks, carries them by the burr on the blossom end, and when they store them they always cut that off. So others can’t steal them. And when they start eating them they just work down through them and eat them in the wintertime, the hulls all stays in the tree. But I’ve actually saw him do that, but even in those days, he’d always, before he left he cut a piece of a dead tree and hew it out with his axe and drive it in that hole to make sure he sealed that hole back up.

BB : Sounds like a really neat guy. That is a really great story, I like that one a lot.

VW: But he actually, that was the way that a lot of them… they had done that, you know, they grew up doing that. You know, don’t go pick up your chestnuts, just ....

BB: I’ve heard one other person up in Kentuck told me a story like that, he said I the winter time if your family was real hungry, you were low on food, you could go out and steal chestnuts from the squirrels, find those holes, and .

VW: see, once you chopped your hole, and you had enough trees around with the hole chopped in them and then plugged back up, you didn’t have to take your axe the next year, you could just take your hammer and knocked the plug out and put it back. They …. kind of like the way they used to harvest deer back in the old days, sounds gory, but like I
said they fenced to keep stuff out, and they used make split rail fences. What they would do they would take one rail off and make, create a low spot in the fence. Well the deer would jump over into the pea patch, everybody grew peas back then, deer love to eat peas and corn, that’s where the deer would go in and out at the lowest spot. They would sharpen sticks and drive them in the ground inside on the field side. Three or four sticks, then they would take a draw knife and sharpen the top of them, razor sharp, the deer jumps over, lands on the sticks, and they go the next morning, shish kabob, and there’s your deer. You know its food, when you’re surviving you think of a lot of stuff. And, if you can’t afford gun powder, so…. Back in those days maybe you didn’t have any gunpowder. They knew how to survive.

BB: what about, do you remember if the house that you grew up in or that your parents grew up in were made out of chestnut, or was there a lot of stuff built with chestnut?

VW: I really don’t know. The log cabin that Mother and Daddy lived in right after they married which was on my Uncle once removed’s place up on the Bullet Creek side, what they Bullet Creek side of Starrs Mountain, now it was log. Now, I don’t know what kind of log, but I know whatever it was … in fact I believe that most of it is still standing, one of my second cousins owns the place not, and I believe that old cabin is still standing up there. So, you know chestnut lasts a long, long, long time. It more than likely could have been chestnut log, but I don’t know.

BB: have you built anything with chestnut yourself or what kinds of things…?

VW: No, I don’t think so, in fact I don’t know if I’ve ever seen a planed piece of chestnut lumber in my life. All we ever did with it, it was a boom for the mountain people when some of the chestnuts started dying because they had such a ready supply of fire wood. You know, the old people that lived off the land and lived in harmony with the land, they survived, but when they cut the dead first and then in they had to they would cut something that was living. They cut what was already dead and cured, so when the chestnut first started dying they didn’t realize what a catastrophe it would be for the chestnut, and the loss of the mast and all that. They kind of gloated in all of this great firewood, which its easy to saw, it saws easy, it splits really well, and they thought they probably, just had a boom in firewood.

BB: so you think they used it mostly just for firewood?

VW: They used it mostly for firewood, now some, they may have sawed some of it in the old sawmills, but I don’t really remember seeing any actual chestnut lumber.

BB: what about any tools or furniture, household stuff that would have made out of chestnut?

VW: No. Never actually seen anything that I knew was made of chestnut. Got a rocking chair up in the barn that Daddy had made probably back around, I think he made it around the first of the Depression, its pretty well made, but most of its poplar. They made a lot of it out of the stuff that was easier to work with, because they had to do it all with hand tools, so they used mostly the softer woods doing things like that.

BB: you kind of already answered this, but have you ever cut down a chestnut tree?

VW: no

BB: So you know of any lumbering practices that are specific to chestnut?
VW: no I don’t. I have a picture somewhere put away of Daddy in a logging camp, when he worked for Conasauga Lumber, back in the Occoe, which is part of the National Forest now, off the Jack Rivers, and there’s a huge pile of logs there. But I’ve never really sat down to look at it to see if you could identify any of them as being chestnuts. But I do have that picture somewhere. It could be.

BB: Did you ever hear anything about chestnut being used to tan leather?

VW: no, never heard that one. But probably somewhere there’s a formula for it.

BB: yeah, it had a lot of acid in it, so some people used it. Do you think chestnut was a more of less desirable lumber than other tree species?

VW: I don’t really know about the lumber part. I don’t never remember seeing anything made out of lumber. If you look at your structure of how a chestnut grows, a lot of them forks a lot, which causes a lot of burls in the wood. And with the way they sawed lumber back in those days, with horse power, steam power, something to turn the saws, with all the burls in where the limbs and forks came off it, it might have been hard to work. You know, finding a good log before you get into any limbs is pretty hard on most of those chestnuts, because they limbed pretty low.

BB: were there any traditions, old time sayings, or songs that you remember mentioning chestnuts?

VW: Not to my remembrance on anything like that.

BB: what about games, any games you played with chestnuts?

VW: no, other than throwing them, kids threw them at each other a lot. You ever been hit by a chestnut burr? [laughs] Boy they hurt.

B: were there any specific games y’all would play?

VW: no, just horsing around kid stuff. The kids have been doing that forever, they’ll always be doing that. Now they do it with cars and unfortunately some of them ends up on the highway, in the wrong positions.

BB: were there any celebrations or gathering, or would people gather chestnuts in sort of a tradition?

VW: no, several years back when I trapped, used to be a fur trapper. Well I worked and fur trapped too. But when I trapped fur, when there was a good fur market. We’d go to, over to Standing Stone State Park to the state fur harvesters convention, and they had it down at the lodge on the lake, they always had boiled chestnuts. I don’t know if that was a tradition or not. But there was one lady who always boiled a big pot of chestnuts.

BB: I wonder why she did that?

VW: I don’t know. She really liked them for on thing, but I reckon she just thought it went with the scenario. Fur trappers and boiled chestnuts. It was probably a staple for a lot of fur trappers in the old days, It was it probably kept a lot of mountain men alive, boiled chestnuts in the wintertime. I’ve really not seen a breakdown on how much protein and all this stuff is in a chestnut, but I’d say they’re pretty healthy. I’d say it was more of less a tradition among the mountain men and among the fur trappers to eat chestnuts.
BB: Would you say when you were young, did you eat everyday, or once in a while, during certain seasons.

VW: well, they were like everything else. You know, kids back in those days, we didn’t get candy and stuff. Kids that lived on the farm, you didn’t get stuff like that. Maybe a Christmas you know. So we lived off of what was growing, that was our candy. When the chestnuts fell it was time to eat chestnuts. And you ate chestnuts, and then a little later the hickory nuts falls right behind it, and then the walnuts, and then you’re working on those. Like in the summer time you’re eating mulberries and the sarvis berries that grow wild. You ever ate a mulberry?

BB: I have had a sarvis berry. I just had one for the first time a could weeks ago

VW: You have, I’ve got 3 trees in the yard. But mulberries are excellent. My sister, my older sister, she’s my young sister, she’s 78, but she’s still running the County cannery here in Bradley county. She runs it during the summer time. All the years she grew up on the farm with us, she always ate mulberries and all this stuff. Since she’s been running this county cannery now ever since she retired about 65. She’s one of those that can’t quit and never will. But, she, somebody brought her 2 gallons of mulberries this year, so she’s determined you can can or make jelly out of anything that exists that is edible. I believe she would make dishrag jelly if she thought she could get it to work. Anyway, somebody brought her 2 gallons of mulberries, and she made jelly out of those things. It is delicious.

BB: That’s your older sister?

VW: that’s my oldest sister, yeah

BB: Wonder if she’d have some chestnut memories?

VW: not much. Like I said in those days the girls stayed in the house, they learned keep how, sew, things like that. And they stayed around the house a lot when they were younger.

BB: This is sort of a more vague question, but do you think the chestnut is an important symbol of life in this area? 100 years later...

VW: Yeah, the mountainous areas, yeah, the lower lands, I don’t know how much it was to the lower ground, but the mountainous, all the mountain people and stuff, I’d say it was. And the recovery of the American chestnuts will one of the greatest benefits to the ecology and ecosystem of this world, because it was a very important mast product. It was important for everything. Wildlife, people and everything else. If it could be brought back that would be one of the best pieces of research they’ve done in this century, that would be my opinion of this.

BB: yeah, I want to talk some about restoration too, but I have some questions first about the blight. So do you remember the chestnut blight first hand?

VW: Just the trees I saw get it, but of course I’ve seen get it, but of course I’ve seen a lot of blight on everything else, I don’t know if it’s the same kind of blight that hits a pear tree, it...

BB: let me step back for a minute, so why do you like to go walk over in the orchards over there?
VW: I’m really interested in the work he’s doing. I’m hoping that the work that’s being done will produce an American chestnut that’s resistant to the blight. In my lifetime I would really like to see them growing wild everywhere again. In fact if he would give me some seedlings I would plant them [laughs]. Especially some of those 95% seedlings.

BB: yeah, everybody’s wanting some of those, I think they’re getting close to where they’re ready to start giving them to folks but...

VW: If he would just give me some of those chestnuts off of the 95% trees I have, the knowledge to grow my own seedlings. I know how to plant nuts, all you have to do is watch a squirrel. You know that? a squirrel plants more seeds than anybody, than man ever thought about. Did you ever watch how he plants them? He puts them just on top of the surface and barely covers them up, because if he buries it too deep it will rot. It has to sprout from the surface, because it sprouts in the fall and the root grows in the winter, then it puts on the top in the spring.

BB: I guess squirrels have got it down.

VW: they’ve got it down pat, they know how to.

BB: well do you remember, what time would the blight have passed through this area?

VW: I don’t know. When we moved to this area right here in ’51, and there was probably still a dozen producing chestnut trees on the east ridge over here. But they slowly but surely disappeared one at a time. The largest of the bunch was probably the last one that died and it was probably 12 inches in diameter or better, and maybe 40, 45 feet tall. That’s the largest one I remember here. Now the two trees that were up where I was born in Monroe County, where I lived til I was 5, now I remember those things were huge. Of course, I was a small lad then so they maybe looked bigger to me. But I still remember they were big.

BB: so, when, before the blight when chestnuts were in their hay day, how prevalent would you say they were around here, do you have any sense of that?

VW: I don’t know but from walking the ridges and the dead logs you would see, I would say right in this area here they weren’t really a large amount of them. I would say they were sparse. You might could say sparse, because there’s some ridges I’ve never seen them on here. They were just in certain places. I know the trees that were still alive when we used to gather chestnuts off of them as boys here were pretty far apart on the ridge, like half a mile some of them apart, but they extended on it all the way into where ADP 40 goes into this same ridge cut over here, they extended the full length of it though, there were a few scattered all up and down it. And there were a few larger logs up there where the blight had killed them before that was probably chestnut.

BB: Do you remember your father or anybody else older to you saying anything about the blight or the loss of the chestnut trees?

VW: yeah, Daddy, heard Daddy talk about it, and I don’t remember exactly when it was that he said it happened, but he said it was pretty devastating to the trees. But like I say, all the mountain people were kind of happy at first because there was a lot of good firewood there, but not realizing that the era of a plant was disappearing. But, they were survivors so plenty of good firewood meant plenty of good surviving, but they never really realized what the impact would be further down the road. And I don’t think anybody ever realized it would kill them, so many of them, you
know completely annihilate them. You know they had seen periods of blight like in their fruit trees, before it would come and went, they figured this episode would come and go, but it didn’t go. It just... I don’t really know, is the blight hat hit the chestnut tree, is it a different blight than hits the fruit trees?

BB: yes. So there’s, you know Chinese and Japanese varieties of chestnut. The blight that actually killed all of the Americans was brought over on some Japanese lumber, the up into New York actually, in 1904, they traced it back. Because that fungus had evolved in China, or Asia, with these Asian chestnuts over thousands and thousands of year, so they had resistance to it that they’d build up over generations and generations, but the American of course didn’t have any of that resistance. So as soon as it got in up there and onto those Americans it just decimated them and then it slowly moved south. So that’s why people down here that I’m talking to, like you, can still kind of remember it whereas people farther north it’d be harder to find people who remember it.

VW but, like where I say, in some of the higher elevations like up at Tellico, there’s probably still bearing chestnut trees. They’ve probably been damaged but I’d say they’re.. of course, those trees that grow at higher elevations, they’re tougher. They have to be to survive the winters. And, that could be why they’re still surviving in the higher elevations some.

BB: So you kind of told me this a little bit already, but how did people respond to the chestnut blight?

VW: well, when it first come through I don’t really think they paid a lot of attention to it. It was just one of those phenomenon of nature that was providing plenty of good firewood. They didn’t have the fore thought or the knowledge that this was going to be catastrophic somewhere on down the road. They were just...

BB: Once they realized that it was a serious as it was, did you ever, was there any sort of ...how did they feel?

VW: People back then, they took things in stride. You know, Mother Nature did it, it was for a reason, something will replace it and life will go on. That was kind of how people lived. Basically off the land a lot, that’s how they looked at things. If something went wrong like that, it was for a reason, and something would come along and replace it, and things would be back to normal. They really, they weren’t worriers much.

BB: so what did replaced the chestnut?

VW: I don’t know that anything. Could your ever really replace the chestnut? I mean, of course where the mighty chestnut stood white oak trees probably grew of something.

BB: Is there anything that replaced it culturally or economically?

VW: I don’t think so.

BB: So if the hogs weren’t getting fed on chestnuts, what were they eating?

VW: Acorns. White oak acorns, they ... but see, like I said earlier, they didn’t realize, they gauged their hog crop, how fat their hogs were going to be, by the chestnuts. But they didn’t realize that it was just another one of the mast crops in natures, and if you’ve got plenty of chestnuts you didn’t have an early frost, so you’re going to have plenty of acorns that year too. So, yeah, I’d say the hogs, it was helping keep them fat, but you’re going to have plenty of acorns every
year you have plenty of chestnuts. It didn’t really dawn on them that, they just gauged it by the chestnuts. If there’s a lot of chestnuts, you’re going to have fat hogs.

BB: Did the loss of the chestnut have any direct economic impact on your family?

VW: No, probably not. They were, like I say, they were adaptable enough that they just turned to something else.

BB: so that’s kind of all my questions about how the chestnut was used, or about the blight specifically. are there any other things you remember about how people would use it, or stories you have about things you remember?

VW: no, I can’t think of anything else right now.

BB: well, if anything else comes to you just speak up. Now I want ot talk about some of the restoration efforts, so are you aware of, or are you involved in the restoration effort yourself?

VW: no.

BB: you know something about it though right?

VW: oh yeah.

BB: so what do you know about it and how do you know of it?

VW: well, I just know from what I, I go down to the chestnut orchard and talk to the professor and all this. Seemingly that his research is on the right track, because I looked at some of his, I think he said was 95% trees that’s in this orchard, and they are attaining some respectable size pretty rapidly. So, if the chestnut it produces, which I haven’t seen any of, resembles American chestnut enough they may be pretty well on their way from height and size these trees have attained so far and still haven’t shown any blight. That would be…. they really looked good that way.

BB: So do you think its important to try to restore this tree?

VW: oh yes, I really do. I think that research is well warranted because, like I say, to reintroduce the chestnut that is almost, even if its almost just like the original, if you can’t completely reproduce a blight resistant that’s exactly original, if its 95% that’s good enough for the ecosystem of everything, because you put that back into it like it was at one time and it will fill a big void.

BB: is there anything specifically that you think would change about the forest with the chestnut back in it?

VW: yah, it would help everything. Without the chestnuts, your deer, all your squirrels and this stuff, the pressure is really on your oak trees and the hickories because you add a new food [cough] if you add another food source, its more food for everything. [coughs] excuse me.

BB: So I guess you’re talking about some of the ecological roles, but how, so, like you learned form your father and you have some memories about how the chestnut was important back in the 1800s early 1900, but do you think the role of the chestnut tree will be the same if its restored in the 21st century, or do you think its role will be different. You spoke about some of the ecological roles, but what about the cultural roles and the economic roles?
VW: no, it will never have the impact it had before because the society now a days is moving too fast, or moving to two things, too much stuff artificial, and they really don’t have any real interest about what is out there, in nature. They go out and they look and say, where’s the forest I can’t see it there’s trees in the way. And every generation is going to get more electronically cultured, and less interested in what’s around them. Its’ where its evolving now. Children now a days, go to the movies or uptown and hang out they call it. We hung out but it was off a limb in a tree or a grape vine swinging across the creek. We did our hanging out somewhere way back in the woods somewhere. Children really don’t do that anymore much.

BB: do you think the fact that young people aren’t as interested in nature and the forests, do you think that’s going to make it harder to restore the chestnut tree?

VW: Uh, yeah. Finding enough interested people will get harder over the years. That’s why the research going on now is so important in my opinion, because while you’ve still got people like Doctor, and some people who’s still interested enough in it to make it work, that’s the time when its got to be developed and made work because if they’re ever going to develop a blight resistant chestnuts I think now is the time because another generation down the road and nobody will be that interested in it. They won’t really care whether there was an American chestnut or there wasn’t.

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

VW: From what I’ve observed from the chestnut orchard, I believe it’s going to happen. Everybody will know more once these seedlings get in the wild, in their natural habitat, where they’re not protected by deer fence. Once they’re introduced back into the mountains, and places, I think a matter or a short 5 or 10 years will tell the story one way or the other, of whether it’s worked or it hasn’t. But under controlled conditions, I don’t think you can get a real good fix on whether it’s going to work or not. They’re going to have to be put in uncontrolled conditions like they were before and see what happens.

BB: so you’re saying now the time to act because it will be harder to get young people interested. Do you think its just impossible to get young people interested, or are there any ways you can think of for getting young people more interested in this project?

VW: well, the only way I can see is to take away all of their ipods, all their cell phones, all of their TVs and all of their cars, then they might get interested in something beneficial. As long as all those exist, they’re going to, too many of them, get interested in it, seriously interested lets say.

BB: well, do you think its important to try to record all of these chestnut stories?

VW: yeah. It’s important to record all old stories of the old ways of doing things, because a lost art is just as tragic as a lost tree. There are old time ways that needs to move on down the line, with some people has to learn them, or it will be lost. You think about it, when you lose all of the, how will I put it, the arts and crafts of survival, we’ll say that the old people, the mountaineers and stuff lived by. Once all that’s gone, and persey say all the grocery stores closed tomorrow how would people live if there weren’t some of that still around? Like my sister, I mentioned that she runs the county cannery, right? Most young girls, they should be interested in canning, you know learning its not going to hurt anything. Maybe they don’t need it now because there’s a McDonalds just down the street. McDonalds just down the street may not be there 10 years from now. We know that everything evolves and goes through cycles. It has its
highs and it has its lows. Usually when it reaches it’s high it goes all the way back to its low. So what will happen in this country in the next 10 years will probably startle us all. Let’s put it this way, there’s some it wouldn’t surprise. But if you know how to get by, you know how to preserve your food and stuff, the sooner you can evolve back into that. But if that art’s ever lost, its gone.

BB: I really like how you put that, a lost art’s just as tragic as a lost tree. Well I’m about through all of my questions, but are there any concerns, hopes and fears, advice you would give to the people trying to restore this tree?

VW: no, just keep working and if you can’t achieve 100%, 95 would be a whole lot better than nothing. And I believe introducing them back to the woods, which I don’t know if they have yet or not. From my observation of how the chestnut trees, the last few that died around here, I would introduce them from the highest elevations and work down. Because at the higher elevations, you’re going to get later foliation in the year, its going to be a lot cooler when the trees are foliating, that’s going to force the new growth to harden off quicker, so you just might... just theory, never been proven, will never be proven until they plant them at higher elevations and see what happens.

BB: some of the most real, or true theories are the ones that people see from observing the woods, not from something done in the lab, so that could be really true. That’s about it. Is there any other stories or memories that come to mind?

VW: no not of chestnut.

BB: Any particular times? Any particular moments that you can recall?

VW: not really

BB: well that’s great, that’s that. I’m going to turn this recorder off.