BB: I’ll press record here, and then I have do this statement thing: 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?

BC: Yes, I have.

BB: All right. So, the first I’ve been doing is just asking people to just state your name, when you were born, where you grew up. That kind of stuff.

BC: All right, my name’s Bob Cornett, and I was born in Hazard, Kentucky in the mountains in 1929. And I lived in town therefore I was not out in the woods much, and therefore, I didn’t really know the chestnut tree. It was gone before I really could remember, but people my age who were out in the woods, country people do remember it. And there were lots of conversation about it, and my dad--I vividly remember my dad talking about it. I remember tears coming to his eyes when he would think about the chestnut, all it meant to him. And then though, it was gone.

That, I guess that was the limit of my understanding of it. I knew it had been important to the older people, but I didn’t fully understand why because I was a town boy instead of a country boy, and I got a back end of this--well, I got the end of the chestnut project itself because an educator friend of mine, Fay King, is the principle of the Stanton Elementary school in Stanton, Kentucky, observed that the chestnut restoration could be an extremely powerful way to help connect schools with their communities. Help get young people and older people involved in doing something useful. Fay understood even though she’s a good bit younger than I am; she’s probably fifteen years younger than I am, [telephone rings] but she understood the significance, understood the hold that the chestnut tree had on the mountain people. [telephone rings] And so she knew that this would grab people’s interest. [telephone rings] Excuse me a second.

BB: Sure.

Why do you think it would grab people’s attention or was sort of a cultural symbol?

BC: Well, the older people, even those that are not old enough to remember it, remembered hearing about it. They heard their grandparents and parents talking about it. There was still chestnut--evidences of chestnuts around. There were chestnut fences, chestnut boards to look at, there was still chestnut trees around. Dead tress that most of us had seen as young people. So the folklore--they knew about it--the word of mouth, they knew about it, and they knew the hold
that it had on the people who were alive when the chestnut was there. They’d heard stories about fattening the hogs and eating the chestnuts in the wintertime.

BB: So, did your dad grow up more out in the country?

BC: Yes.

BB: That’s why he remembered it. Where did he grow up?

BC: Near Hazard.

BB: Okay. Do you remember any specific stories that he told?

BC: I don’t guess I do. I don’t guess I have those stories in mind. I think the only thing I really vividly remember is how important the trees were to him and how sad he was that they were gone.

Let’s see. My interest in the project came from the fact that that hold that the tree had had on people was well understood by the lady who is probably the finest educator I’ve ever known. That’s Fay. And she wanted to get involved with the American Chestnut Foundation in order to help connect it with the community, and she did—she and I did get involved with Rex Man and help form this Kentucky chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, and we did so for the purpose of using it, using the chestnut project as a community-building tool. And we went up to Linefork up to the Kingdom Come school, and found a kindred spirit in that school principle, Betty Caudill, and she jumped on it. She understood it too even though she had married into the mountains. She was a Kansas lady, but she understood the importance of the chestnut up there. She got the fire department involved. She asked the fire department, volunteer fire department, to go out and interview—to take the kids out to interview the old people to get the story recorded, make video tapes, and I’ve loaned you that copy of that. But they also started a chestnut festival, and as far as I know, that was the first chestnut festival ever started. They had it at the school—the school and the volunteer fire department together sponsored--

BB: When did that happen?

BC: I believe that was five years ago. I believe—four and a half years ago. I believe the one coming up in the fall, they’re going to have it this fall. I believe this is the fifth one. They had it at the school, and the school is—well, Betty Caudill became ill with breast cancer and followed it for a long time, finally died a little over a year ago. And without her there to protect the school, it was closed.

BB: So they don’t have it anymore?

BC: But I wouldn’t—oh, they’re going to have it go ahead right on. That’s the real significance to me of the chestnut project as a way to build community. Ordinarily, it would have stopped when the school stopped, but they had the community involved. They had the firemen involved
and others. It was a community project to begin with, not a school project or at least not merely a school project. So last fall they didn’t have the school building because it was closed, but they had the festival, had it at the fire station. And while they were at it, they just added a bluegrass musical festival to it and added home coming for the Kingdom Come settlement school, so they had three things going at the same time. It was quite an event, quite a success.

And that, in turn, the fact that they succeeded at that gave them the confidence to go after getting the school building in the hands of the community so that they could use it as a community education center, and they now have it. They went to the legislature and they’re going to be taking possession of the building July 1st, and they will have a whole bunch of things in there that, if all goes well there will be a forestry education center in there. There will be a component of Lilley Cornett woods in there with Eastern Kentucky University being involved. There will be a daycare facility for the little kids that will be a community co-op, not something that the government runs, but something that the community runs. And, there will be things like gardens and chestnut trees. There will be all kinds of things that have to do with the community. They might have a herd of goats out there.

BB: Do you think it’s more difficult or less difficult or more important, less important to do that kind of a project in rural Appalachia, eastern Kentucky than it is in other places?

BC: I think that kind of thing is extremely important anywhere, however, I think it’s more doable in eastern Kentucky and the mountains generally than it is in more urban settings. They’re more self-reliant. There’s more self-reliance left in the mountains. They’re less dependent on the government aside from the welfare sort of stuff we hear about, but when a job needs to be done, they do it the way they did in the old days. If a barn needs to be built, they just get together and build it, or did. There is an element of that left, and yes, that’s what I think we’ve got to build on. I think if my dream holds up, and my guess is that it will, and Rex and I share this, there will be community projects going on all over the American chestnut range from Georgia to Maine where you will have people cultivating chestnuts, cultivating small garden plot sizes of them, five or ten or fifteen trees, getting them big enough that they can sustain themselves without having to be tended to and if you’ve got them every two or three miles apart, then they’ll repopulate the mountains, but we need the people to come together voluntarily to get them started, to protect them from the deer, see that they get water if you have a drought and otherwise treat it like a garden crop, and I think that’s doable. I think--I know they will. I’ve seen enough up there to know--well, there will be one of those plots, and we need a name for them, I guess we don’t have, to be one of those there at that school and those kids will be tending the chestnut, those little kids will be tending to the chestnut trees, so yes, I think it’s doable in the mountains, and I think it will lead to all kinds of things.

There will, for example, probably be an old fashioned post office in that school building as a direct result of the chestnut project. The postal service wanted to close the post office, which is right across the street from the school, right across the road, but some retired post masters from
around the state, including one in Louisville, want to see an old fashioned post office in that school, so they’ve gone to bat on behalf of saving that post office. Now they haven’t won that battle yet, but I expect they will and you’ll have people coming to the post office to talk to each other they way they used to do. There is a major community-building effort afoot—not effort, that’s the wrong word—momentum. It’s there, and it came from the love of that chestnut tree.

BB: Do you think it would have been—why do you think chestnut is the vehicle for this community building. Why not another tree or another—?

BC: Well, I don’t guess there’s anything else up there that has had the historic significance. Well for one thing that tree, the people who did remember it or remembered hearing about it as I did—I believe I’ve heard Rex and some readings that somewhere around forty percent of trees in the mountains were chestnuts. They were the dominant tree up there. I know of nothing else in nature that had that kind of hold on them, had that kind of significance. It was a big, big deal for people who lived out in the country, lived off of the land. This was before the time that you went to work in a coal mine or went off to Detroit and got a job in the car factory; this was pre-industrial. People lived in the mountains a hundred years ago very much the way they did five hundred years ago. This was a pre-industrial society, so the natural things around were enormously important. It’s all they had. They lived in harmony with nature.

BB: Yeah, that is so wild to think about. Like, my grandmother was born in 1924, and so she’s about 87—no, no she’s like 84, and it is crazy how much has changed in her lifetime like the way she was raised to the way I was raised.

BC: Where was your grandmother raised?

BB: On Kingdom Come creek.

BC: Right there, okay. Well now is she still living?

BB: Uh-huh, yeah.

BC: And still got good memories?

BB: Yeah, she’s got some pretty good memories.

BC: I bet she remembers the chestnut tree.

BB: I think she does, yeah. She remembers—I think she said that she was in her early thirteen, fourteen kind-of age when she remembers the blight, but yeah, she remembers gathering them up with her brother and stuff like that, so I need to interview her about them. I haven’t interviewed her yet, but it is amazing.

BC: Well, where does she live?
BB: She still lives right in that house that she was raised at on Kingdom Come creek.

BC: Does she live by herself?

BB: Uh-huh.

BC: Yeah, go spend a little time with her. She’ll be great at--and her memory’s still good?

BB: Uh-huh--uh, I wouldn’t say good, but it’s not bad. She’s kind of in between. It’s pretty good.

BC: There’s wonderful history up there, and that lady will--I catch myself--when I was a boy, those kids out in the country always envied us in town; we had things they didn’t have like movie theaters and pool rooms and so on, but the truth is that they had a better deal than we did. I felt a little bit deprived not being out there. I was part of that industrial world. What dominated the town I lived in was a coal mining town, but out in the country people my age still, many of them lived the way--really you can’t tell. I read a book not so long ago about a village in England in about fourteen hundred and fifty or maybe fifteen hundred, but five hundred years ago figures, and you couldn’t tell the difference between what the pattern of living there then and the pattern out in the country in the mountains when I was a child.

BB: Uh, let’s see. So, the way I have this thing kind of organized is first I’ve been asking people about their memories, what they remember. Do you remember anything about the blight? When the blight came through?

BC: No, all I can remember is that there were some dead chestnut trees around, and people were all torn up about it. That’s really all I remember. My dad and others that really lived with them, and I didn’t--my daddy brought home a paycheck from the railroad. He didn’t live by going out in the woods and collecting chestnuts and turning hogs loose to get fat and doing all the other things that the country people did. He’d grown up that way, but I didn’t.

BB: Uh-huh. I see. Okay, I guess what I’m curious about to hear from you is just about the chestnut as a community-building effort. I guess, can you just tell me the story of how you got--I guess you told me a little bit of it already--how you got involved with the restoration effort and why you think it’s important. Just like, what your thoughts are on that.

BC: Well, that’s largely what we were talking about yesterday when I was in Dayton at the Kettering Foundation meeting. I’m personally convinced that we’re going to be having to go back to some of the simpler living that we did a long time ago. There are all kinds of reasons for that, one of them is that the quality of the food that we’re getting out of that industrial sets of processes is not near as good as the food we had, that grandma had, used to eat when you grew it.
But people have to be involved with the decisions in their communities or there’s not really a
democracy when we just turn our government over to experts, we’ve done things to ourselves
that are pretty serious. I won’t try to get into political science lectures, but we’re not running our
government anymore as my friend at the Kettering Foundation, David Matthew says. We’re
supposed to own the store. We’re not customers at the government; we’re supposed to own the
store. We’ve forgotten that, and we’ve got to get back to it, and the only way to get back to it
really is to care about what goes on right around us, get involved in what goes on right around
us. Not just hire somebody to do it, but do it. That’s what we were discussing.

That attitude is still present in the mountains. More than in just about anywhere else. It’s
present in rural areas generally, but it’s more prevalent in the mountains than anywhere else in
the country that I know about. And so, yes I think that with the help of that chestnut project, the
chestnut restoration, I think we can be a beacon, be an example for the whole rest of the country
on how to take control of their lives back again. So this, from my point of view, is a great--I’ve
been watching governments for close up to fifty years and more.

BB: Is that what your career was?

BC: Well, that’s what my career was basically.

BB: Did you work in Frankfort or something?

BC: I did, I left Frankfort when I left Berea college, and I went to work in Frankfort in a new
little organization attached to the government office state budget division. I was all of twenty-
one years old working on state finances, and the guys I was working with were older heads.
They were all up to maybe twenty-five or twenty-six or seven years old. We were going to save
the world. We didn’t quite get it done though. Some of it went unsaved. But yes, I’ve been
around government a long time. I think I know the difference between what governments can
usefully, effectively do and what they can’t do, and raising kids is not something the government
does well. We need to do that, and every educator I know agrees with that, by the way. And
every grandparent I know agrees with that.

There was a story I’m fond of telling about a visit last fall when I was up at the fire department
in Gordon, the fire department that took over the chestnut festival. This was on Saturday
October 19th if I remember that date right, and they were having--oh, this was about noon and
they had a bluegrass band on the stage and people were dancing and it was a happy occasion.
One of the firemen came up and whispered to me said, “Bob, we have an emergency, would you
kind of look after this bluegrass thing, keep it going while we’re gone.” I says, “Why sure but
what’s the emergency?” He says, “Well a coon hound has fallen in a mountain break.” That’s
those crevices that come when coal mines cave in, and the dog fell through forty or fifty feet
deep, and they needed help getting the dog out.
Now, it didn’t even occur to him not to go; it didn’t occur to him to go to the telephone book and try to find the government agency in charge of rescuing coon hounds. They just went to do it, and it turned out they came back after awhile. It was--without getting it done they said that it was too far down for their rope and they were going to have to get a more experienced rope guy, but they had one coming. One of their buddies from somewhere was coming. At the time I left by the end of the day, they still hadn’t gotten it out. They called me that night. I got a call at 10:30 that night when I got back home, and I was worn out. The firemen just wanted to make sure I knew that they got the dog out, and it was all right. Now if it had been Lexington or Chattanooga, they’d still be looking for the government agency in charge of coon hounds. That’s spirit up there, and that’s what I think can be mobilized. I think it is, needs to be, I think that’s a perfect example.

We’ve got school buildings all over the mountains that are empty from consolidation. It’s easier for government agency to build a big school for people. It’s easier for a hog farmer to build a big hog barn too, or a cattle feeding operation to get bigger and bigger and so on. I think some of the same attitudes are in place, but in this case that building would be just another one. It’d be an abandoned school building, and it would be just another sign of a demoralized community. But it’s working exactly in the opposite direction. They’re taking control of themselves, taking control of their lives up there, and it’s a direct result of that little bit of work they did with the school on the chestnut project. It showed them that they could do it and do something that mattered. There’s a club up there, Rex probably told you. He and I went up to the community college at Cumberland in the southeast community college.

BB: Oh, yeah.

BC: And they formed a club, had it for a while of high school and middle school kids. The college is kind of helping them sponsor it, encouraging kids to get equipped to go to college, but they’re taking on the chestnut project as the chestnut restoration. But all kinds of things are coming together, because they’re going to get that tree back.

BB: Yeah. Do you think that they’re wanting to get the tree back because they think that they’ll turn hogs out to feed on it like they did, or why do you think--what motivates them you think?

BC: I don’t think they’re thinking that way. Just the notion of doing something to strengthen this community to make life better that’s probably about as far as they can go. Now there will be a little bit of money to be made with the chestnuts, I think. We talked a little about it. They can go in the woods now if they want to and bring those sprouts in and put them in pots and sell them and put them at farmer’s markets. Now they won’t live long. They’ll live--what eight or ten years? But a lot of people would like to do that and even when they die, they’ll have sprouts coming back. So, there’s a lot of people that would like to participate in the restoration project that way. So, yes they can make some money with it. Although that’s not really what’s
motivating it, it’s just more a sense of civic obligation and civic pride. Makes them proud of themselves.

BB: Yeah. Do you think it has something to do with being nostalgic or sentimental about the chestnut?

BC: Well, I guess that’s part of it. However, it seems to me that just the connection between the generations is probably the key to it. This connects the older people with the younger ones, in an effective natural kind of way, and without that connection [telephone rings] they get disconnected. Excuse me.

BB: Sure.

Um, what motivates the people or connecting the generations?

BC: I think that that may well be, if you had to pick out one thing in this that may well be the heart of it. That’s a natural connection, and we’ve done things to disconnect that, the way we’ve been handling schooling. You know, moving the school off to where it belongs in the--it’s under the control of state government or some county office, not the neighbors, not the community. That separates. And a lot of other things have caused separation. You don’t have kids out there planting a garden with grandparents anymore or with the adults, and that connection, I guess that is the single most key piece of this. That’s what ties it, that’s the glue. If there’s one piece of glue, that’s it. It’s the generation connection.

BB: So, one thing is that kind of interesting to me is that you’ve got this hybrid tree we’re going to plant it out in this grid system, but the reality is that it’s going to be--most the people associated with the Chestnut Foundation are older, retired people who have these memories from their father or folks like that. They have this sort of nostalgia or remembering their dad talking about chestnuts or whatever it was, but the reality is that who is going to be caring for these trees in fifty years or a hundred years is going to have to be younger people, right? But they’re not invested in it in that same way that the older people are.

BC: Well, they’re not in the trees--if nothing were done, the tree could pass and the next generation of people your age or younger would barely know. That would just be something they read about in a history book just like other things that are long gone. This connection makes it real for the kids too.

BB: Uh-huh. That’s good.

BC: Now that is one of the things that happens to older people. They really are different from people in the prime money-making years, career years. We just have a different set of values, and the kids matter. That’s just a delight to see kids out there getting turned on by trees.
BB: So, do you think it’s more important to the adults, or why is it important for kids to have those connections? What does that do for them?

BC: Well, I guess maybe a way to go at it is what they don’t learn if they don’t have connections with adults that care about them. If they merely go off to school, and really learn what they learn by sitting in a row with the teacher telling them stuff, and then learning how to spout it back and that’s all they learn, they’re missing the context. They’re missing what life’s about. It’s a very, very narrow thing--it was naturally part of growing up a long time ago. They were naturally part of a family. They were included. There wasn’t any separation of the generations. There wasn’t any separation of kids of different ages. You had kids ten year old kids and five year old kids together. That’s the natural way things were done, and we’ve done a lot of unnatural things to disconnect, to lose some of that. The older people, I now know, regret the fact that that’s lost. They’ve lost something. The older people have lost that connection young ones. They don’t like that. It’s not the way it’s supposed to be. It’s not in the DNA to be that way. You’re supposed to pass these things on.

Now, do kids benefit from it? Yes, they absolutely do. There’s a book right here I’ll mention to you that David Matthews at the Kettering Foundation referred me to. *The Singing Neanderthals*. Now that book’s talking about little children, even infants, but the natural connection that occurs between an infant and an adult, the baby talk kind of thing, responding to the child, responding to the smile. That’s a partnership between the little one and in fact there’s even some technical terminology they use. Infant-directed speech. They’re learning the language even when they can’t speak, the gestures, the smiles, the rhythm, the body movements. That’s all part of growing up, and I guess I think having children around older people is part of it too.

BB: Yeah, I think you’re right. I think it is important.

BC: It’s just part of it, and there is a difference between the older people a non-judgmental kind of thing that goes with them. We’re not trying to control them, we’re perfectly content to help them. We’re on their side. Parents frequently are not on the side of the kids. Parents have got notions about what kids are supposed to do. Grandparents don’t really have that.

BB: Do you have grandchildren?

BC: Do I have any? Oh, yeah. I’ve got a whole passel of them. I’ve got two grandkids next door, and I’ve got a bunch more within five miles.

BB: So, what do you do at your bluegrass festival here? Tell me about your bluegrass festival. Are you doing something about chestnuts there?

BC: No.

BB: Oh, okay. I thought I heard that.
BC: No, we’re not doing anything in particular about chestnuts this year. We would, if there were--

BB: Had you in the past?

BC: We’ve had an exhibit, the Chestnut Foundation guys. Rex is a great bluegrass fan. Some of the others are. Have you met Mike French?

BB: No, but I have his name. I want to go--I guess he’s living in Paintsville or something.

BC: Yeah.

BB: Yeah, I’m going to try to go talk to him when I’m around Whitesburg in a couple weeks.

BC: Yeah, that might not be too far out of your way. But Mike, of course he’s finished his degree, his masters at U.K., and I guess it was probably at the end of December just recently, but they’re working him to death planting trees, not necessarily chestnuts, but planting them on a big scale, thousands a day. Well, I don’t know what I was going to tell you about--oh, he’s a bluegrass music fan, and I need to get him some tickets now that I think of it. There will be a bunch of the chestnut guys at the festival, but we won’t have, unless somebody wants to put an exhibit in there and it still might no be too late to do it, but probably won’t. They probably won’t get around to having an actual exhibit this year, and Rex being a little bit worried about his health is a big problem too.

BB: Yeah, that’s too bad.

BC: We’ll do some things about this community piece of it. We’ve got some scholars, some educators, teachers as well as professors, students in education coming to have a discussion about this whole issue of--that will focus mostly on how to use music to make these communities better.

BB: So, how did you get so interested in community development stuff?

BC: Well, I don’t know. I guess maybe as much as anything else having been on the inside of bureaucracies for so long I came to see clearly the limitations on what can be done from inside a government agency, and there are things that just simply have to be done by people, not by institutions and connecting with young people is certainly one of them.

BB: So, do you think that the chestnut restoration project can be done by government agencies or not?

BC: No, I don’t think so.

BB: Why not?
BC: Well, it would be too massive for one thing. I don’t see the money to do it. With enough money, they could go out there and you could hire forest service employees and go plant chestnuts, but that’s not really an efficient way to go at it. What Rex is talking about is his plans for them far away the better way just from an efficiency point of view get it done. But it’s just--if we did it that way, there would be nothing left when you get finished except chestnut trees. There wouldn’t be all these other things that are taking place on the line for them as a by product of it. There wouldn’t be the day care program. There wouldn’t be the chestnuts outside for the kids to help nurture. There wouldn’t be a bunch of guys going to rescue coon hounds. There wouldn’t be a school building in use in a vibrant way. It would just--the whole set of things all for a good promise of transforming that community in a positive way would not have happened.

BB: What do you think were some of the reasons why a community like Line Fork or other communities got to be so disconnected? Do you think it was the industrialization or when did that change happen and why did it happen?

BC: Well, the profound change there really is a profound difference in the way people live today and the way they lived--well, I had an aunt die just a few months ago at age 102. She hadn’t seen an automobile until she was fifteen years old or so living in an isolated section of Leslie county. They lived entirely off, almost entirely off of the land and each other. They were pretty well self-contained. They didn’t buy much from outside didn’t have money to buy it anyhow, but it was entirely--this was a cooperative way of living. This was a real community. The helped each other, that was the whole culture. They wouldn’t have made it otherwise, and now you look at the situation now how you live, how I live for that matter. We go get a paycheck somewhere else go to Ford motor company or go somewhere and get on a payroll and then buy everything. Don’t know the guy who produced it, don’t need to know.

I only barely know my neighbor two doors over. I’m not particularly proud of that fact, but he’s selling his house, he’s lived there seven or eight years. I nod to him when I see him, but I don’t think I’ve ever had a real conversation with him. Now that, we don’t need each other, and I think that’s the fundamental change is farming it out. Everything we do we farm out somebody else, and that--we’re not going to be able to drive as far if we do that with four dollar gasoline or five, but I think we’re headed back. We’re heading back to where Wendell Berry told us forty years ago where we needed to go. We’re now taking him seriously. I saw it this morning at the farmer’s market. The difference in atmosphere at that farmer’s market in Lexington and the atmosphere when you go to Kroger’s is the difference in daylight and dark, and the quality of the food is profoundly different. The taste and the quality--the nutritional value of it.

BB: Yeah, there is a real difference.

BC: Well, we’re going back to the future as somebody put it.
BB: So, in what way are you involved in the chestnut restoration effort? I know you told me--so you’ve done some community building kind of work. Is that the main way that you’re involved? Or have you planted any trees yourself?

BC: No, I haven’t been out planting trees. And by the way, I will now that Rex has got me thinking now because of his garden thing. I didn’t--the chestnut trees really aren’t native out here in this area, and it wouldn’t really have been particularly appropriate to have something that would grow up to be a chestnut tree here, but a garden with some chestnuts that would be for the purpose of producing sprouts for later on just to keep that seed stock alive just incase something goes haywire on the main experiment and Rex reminds me that there could be another blight come along or that blight could mutate, in which case it would be nice to have sprouts coming off.

Yeah, so we’ll probably get a few chestnut trees around here, but no, I don’t know the tree. I would barely know it if I saw it in the woods. I have been out with the foresters. They show me, but then I forget. This other piece of it is really about all that I can contribute.

BB: So you’re mainly interested in the community building aspect of it?

BC: Uh-huh.

BB: That’s really interesting. I don’t have a lot of that. You’ve heard about the restoration effort. You understand the science basically and how they’re going to do this grid thing that Rex has told you about. So, do you think that it will be successful?

BC: Well, sure. It looks like it’s going along. I did go by that farm one day, the experimental farm.

BB: Oh, in Meadowview, Virginia?

BC: Yeah, Abingdon. As far as I can tell from what those guys tell me, there’s no real reason to doubt that the project will succeed. We’ll have chestnuts back again.

BB: So, what do you think the role of a chestnut will be in the twenty-first century as opposed to what it was in the twentieth century or the nineteenth century?

BC: Oh my goodness. The purpose of the tree out there growing. Well, I don’t guess I know what will be happening--thinking about the mountains mostly where the tree was made and where it will be coming back and that coal mining country. The coal is eventually going to run out, and they’re going to need to go back to living from the land at least those that stay in the mountains. And there will, as far as I can tell, be fewer jobs to commute off to, so taking care of them providing for their own living is going to be more important than it was.

This industrial revolution as we’ve known it is going to take on a different form. We’ve about run its course on using oil anyway and coal is not going to last forever certainly not in eastern
Kentucky. So that’s going to put you back to where you either move out or you live on what’s there. You live on what’s there by respecting and understanding it. The tree, I would expect we’ll find people harvesting chestnuts and eating them. Probably won’t be turning the pigs loose, but they may do that. Trees generally if all goes well they’ll be treating forests not as something you go mine, and that’s how they dealt with the forest up here when they first came in. It wasn’t real different from mining coal; it was something that was there in one shot you’d go get it, you move on. That I hope is not what happens. I hope they see it as a sustainable part of their livelihood, and I think they will. But yes, they’re going to be living a whole lot more like they did a long time ago, and I think it’d be better.

BB: Do you have concerns or hopes or fears about the restoration process and how it will work? Any thoughts like that?

BC: Well, just getting organized to--this is a massive task, and by the way, the internet will facilitate it. A whole lot of people will be able to communicate and be able to see each other’s politics. Do you ever use those webcams?

BB: No, I never have.

BC: Well, I barely have, but you, you know, can see. You have a camera aimed at you and people on the other end can see you. You can aim that camera at your tree or your garden or anything else, and people on the other end can see and you can see them and talk. And it’s free, so I like those--if you’re willing to put up with a little of a lack of quality, it’s free. It’s not like those teleconferencing things that the big businesses use, but it’s perfectly adequate for Linefork and communicating with somebody in Ohio or Maine for that matter.

Now, I guess I’m betting that there will be a natural networking take place, that is once patterns get started. It will be too slow to get started and that by itself won’t work. There will be a temptation and probably a necessity to do some top down organizing, and I guess to the extent that I would have one overriding concern it is that the top down organizing the need to do that could actually get in the way of the community building job. We need both, but I think and I’m confident that we can get enough of the community building of the real stuff done so that it won’t get overwhelmed by the--well, Linefork as a community is taking its on.

It may well be that you’d want to also, the Chestnut Foundation may also want to make a deal with the national rotary club just to pull a name out of a hat. And say, “Here we’ll get you guys to do this, have your chapter, your rotary chapter and Whitesburg do this one, this one, this one.” If you do that, there will be plenty of looking after chestnuts, but they won’t be looking at the other connections that could come as a result of it. It won’t be a full fledged community project as it needs to be. I think that’s correct. That’s one of the things we talked about up with the Kettering people yesterday.

BB: So what were you going up there for? To raise money or something?
BC: No, they don’t put out money. I think that David Matthew who is the president of that is probably the best scholar in the country, the best that I know of from the point of view of seeing how to really do the community building job from genuine grass roots. The distinction between going out and doing it for them and having them do it. He understands as clearly, more clearly that any other scholar that I know of in the country, and he’s got some people on the staff up there that—he by the way grew up in a little town in south Alabama cotton and peanut factory country, and his daddy was—his granddaddy was the school superintendent in that little county, so he grew up around that. But he ended up as president at the University of Alabama when he was just thirty two years old—I think thirty two—and had a distinguished career there, went Washington as secretary of the department of education. [door bell rings]

BB: Hello.

Jean: Hello.

Roy: Hello.

Jean: Y’all session’s over. This is computer session.

BB: [laughs]

BC: Come over, come over grandson.

Roy: How you doing granddad?

Jean: Can’t you turn some lights on?

BC: No, we’re just--

Roy: Hiding out in the dark?

BB: Sitting in the dark.

BC: This is grandson Roy Miller.

Roy: Hi.

BB: Hey there, Roy. Roy Miller? I can’t hear with these things on.

BC: And Grandma Jean. We’re talking about chestnuts.

Roy: That’s a good think to talk about. You just ignore me real quick.

BB: We’re about done.
BC: Well, they’re doing research on this issue. And they liked--they wanted to tie in with what we were doing. We had the school superintendent from Henry County, Wendell Berry’s county, and a couple of other schools to go.

BB: So the chestnuts were just a little part of a bigger thing that y’all were talking about.

BC: Yeah, the chestnuts are just one tool.

BB: What are the other tools that y’all have?

BC: What are the other tools?

BB: Yeah.

BC: Well, bluegrass music is one, farmer’s markets are one. That was a beautiful sense of community over there this morning. There was some kids there. One of my friends who’s a music teacher teaches the violin at North Lexington at a inner city school, black school. They had five kids there, little ones playing the violin. Now you’d be a whole lot better off if they’d been playing bluegrass I told him. [laughs]

But yeah, we’ll have some bluegrass and farmer’s markets with young people doing things. Young people will be growing stuff and selling at farmer’s markets, there will be a youth corner. So those things we talked about and even getting to the point that there is an understanding of nutrition as a byproduct of this so that that can start combating that childhood obesity and diabetes. You know that’s a terrible problem and that’s coming I think part of it is because people are sedentary, but part is because the quality of food is just not as nutritious as it once was. We’re not eating things that we need to eat.

BB: Do you know anything about the nutrition of the chestnuts?

BC: You know, I don’t know anything about the chestnut’s nutritional quality, but it would be great to know.

BB: I think they’re pretty nutritious.

BC: That would just make it a lot more glamorous project if there’s real strong nutritional quality, and I bet there is.

BB: Yeah, I think there is. I think they’re pretty starchy but compared to other nuts they have a lot of vitamins and stuff.

BC: Well, that would be good. Yeah, one of these days they’ll be able to sell chestnuts. Rex tells me that his daddy used to go to--Rex grew up in western North Carolina mountains. His daddy used to go to Washington D.C. to sell chestnuts and moonshine.

BB: Yeah, he told me that story. That is pretty wild.
BC: We can go back to that.

BB: [laughs] Yeah, Wendell Berry’s daughter runs a winery, I think, or owns a winery up around here somewhere.

Well, is there any other memories or stories you want to share about chestnuts before--

BC: Well, let’s see if I can think of anything else. I don’t guess I can think of anything else about chestnuts. I have gotten acquainted with those foresters and the fish and wildlife kinds of guys. The outdoor guys and gals, there’s a whole lot of women in this you know. And I think that’s just the first great breeding for a person. There’s more getting in them than there is in the corporate world. I like them, like being around them. Unselfishness there, and I’ve seen what happens with kids out there. I watched a little boy about eight years old get up in one of those elevator trucks--what do they call them? They get in them--the telephone companies use them and the fire company.

BB: Oh yeah, those bucket things.

BC: Bucket. Yeah, bucket truck. Watched that little boy get up there and those foresters were just--well, he pollinated them, pollinated some chestnuts at age eight, and remembers it vividly and that will be an experience that he remembers for the rest of his life. He was part of it, and that’s the whole thing. We need to be participants in life not spectators, and this is a beautiful way to do it. I don’t see any need to separate bluegrass music from chestnuts by the way. You can write songs about chestnuts as they did.

BB: Are there any other similarities between bluegrass music and chestnuts?

BC: Do what?

BB: What are some of the other similarities between bluegrass music and chestnuts?

BC: What is it about the connection?

BB: Yeah, what are the connections?

BC: Well, I think that song’s on there. Listen to them sing that song and you’ll see, but having kids a whole bunch of kids welcoming the chestnuts back and one of these days we might just pick a weekend and have a chestnut festival that all these participating communities can join in, and they can all sing songs. They can share their songs about the chestnuts. It’s just a matter of making a community celebration out of it. That would be where the music comes in. It’s all just fun.

And that’s a unique piece of bluegrass music too as opposed to country music or classical music. You go to a classical music concert and you just buy a ticket and you know just exactly what they’re going to do and they’re real good at it and they’ll entertain you and you go home.
Bluegrass is much of what you’re going to is entirely different from that. These people are all participants. It’s a community participation thing. You’ll see that at Cowan Creek. You did go before you said?

BB: Yeah, I’ve been a couple of times, and I’m actually going to--they’re going to pay me to help be an assistant fiddle teacher this time.

BC: They are?

BB: Uh-huh.

BC: Are you a pretty good musician?

BB: No, I mean I can play--I don’t play bluegrass, I play old time, but I’m definitely still working. I mean, I’ve been playing for a couple years, so I can sometimes play along and keep up, but not always.

BC: Let me get your mailing address and phone number while I’ve got you.

BB: Yeah, how did you get all into this festival stuff? How did you start?

BC: How did we get started on it in the first place?

BB: Yeah.

BC: Well, I don’t know. We just decided that we wanted to have a festival. [laughs] There’s a story about that in--here, let me see if this--

Jean: Did you hear me?

BC: Did you talk to me?

Jean: Yes. I said, “Use the word I.”

BC: She says it wasn’t we it was me.

BC: Let’s see. Sixty-seven. Yes, this would be a pretty good description of what got the festival all started. Just keep that thing and let me get this--these things are slipping and sliding.

BB: All right. Well, I think we got it. I’m going to turn this recorder off.