BB: Okay, the first thing I have to do is give you this statement: The key objective of this interview is to serve as a research tool to document memories of the American chestnut. 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.

I think what I’m going to concentrate on here is: how long have you been involved in the chestnut foundation, and why are you involved? What motivated you, and any stories that you have, and just include your name. Just some background information: Who you are, where you live. Go for it.

TC: Now we can start?

BB: Yeah, go for it.

TC: All right. My name is Tracy Coulter. I’m currently living in Mont Holly Springs, Pennsylvania. I was originally born in Michigan and actually went to high school in Switzerland. In Zurich, Switzerland was the first time I ever tasted chestnuts, and the reason I became involved with this organization--and I’m thinking it was probably twenty years ago, this is 2008--was because my father, Bud Coulter, once he retired had set his mind to get involved with the restoration of American chestnut.

At the time I was living in Virginia, and Dad would come down south to go to chestnut meetings. And I’d go to the meetings to see my dad. Of course, my father was the son of a plant breeder and a bit of a plant breeder himself, but it wasn’t until I was at a meeting--actually this was in Terra Alta I went to see my dad, and it was at the home of Nora and Bill McDonald up in Alpine Lakes. And I saw a video that told the story, some of the stories about what the American chestnut meant to folks that lived in Appalachia.

Now I grew up in Michigan, and we have big trees up there primarily because the chestnuts that were planted were isolated from the blight. But it wasn’t part of our culture, and just hearing what a tremendous loss this tree was really got me excited about the restoration, the possibility, and sort of understanding the loss.
So, in 1995 when I moved to Pennsylvania I became involved with the organization up there. I served as treasurer and various capacities. I currently serve as the DCNR Department of Conservation and Natural Resources liaison to the Pennsylvania chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation.

But apart from the chestnut itself, what is remarkable in my mind about this organization is the people. So many of the folks we work with are dedicating their retirement years to the restoration of a tree that they’ll never see grow. And they’re really planting for the future, and I’m just in awe. And it’s something they come from all walks of life, all levels of education, but you can speak a common language when you talk about the chestnut, and there’s that passion. It’s just a great story.

Dad used to say, “The nice thing about this organization is we’re not against anything. We’re just for something.” So, I hope to plant trees with my grandchildren, so they can watch them grow. Do you have any questions for me?

BB: That’s pretty much it today. I’m just going to do what motivated you and if you have any kind of specific memories or little stories that you want to--

Go ahead and put this on. I was picking it up fine, and I realized it wasn’t even--

TC: Yeah, I have a pretty soft voice.

I’m just trying to think of specific chestnut memories. Of course, one of the last things I did with my father, Dad and I did a field plot up in northern Michigan where there was a tree that was seventy six inches in diameter, and it was the mother tree that was planted around the turn of the century. About the same time, it was a Pennsylvania rail road man who moved up there, was building this house, but brought chestnuts with him. And this tree was tremendous, and there were two other trees that were forty inches in diameter in that same stand. But that was just such a wonderful moment seeing those big chestnuts, seeing seedlings growing all of their own, and spending that time in the field with my dad actually was pretty neat.

Gosh, chestnut memories first ate them in Switzerland and first bought them on the street in Kombs. And they’re called Heißen maroni, and they’re warm and they’re just a great very--not
nourishing, but it’s comfort food roasted chestnuts. So, I knew about eating them I just didn’t
know about the American chestnuts. Anyway.

BB: How did your dad get so into it I wonder?

TC: You know, my dad--it’s interesting his father was a seed farm manager for Fairmore Seeds,
and they moved around according to the seasons. So I expect Dad saw them a lot when he was
young, but he also worked for Dow Chemical. But he did a lot of field research as a young man
and did all over the southern and eastern United States as well as Michigan. And I expect he
probably saw a lot of the remnants of the chestnut population, and honestly, we never had that
conversation. Dad passed away in 2004.

You know, I expect it’s just that, and Dad always had a passion for growing things. Sort of the
underdog. The stories my children have about my dad, Dad would be driving along and he’d
stop in the middle of the road and say, “See that tree? That’s a chestnut.”

And my kids would be sitting in the backseat and saying, “Grandpa, grandpa! We’re going to
get hit!” But it was just something he wanted his grandchildren to see, and he named his trees,
his favorite tree. They had a farm in Northern Michigan. It was called John Henry, and when I
go up there now, I still see John Henry standing out there. Dad also worked with Chinese
chestnuts and was really part of starting the Chinese chestnut. He worked for Denis Fulbright
and others in Michigan to get the--oh, gosh. I can’t call it an industry, but the chestnut culture
going on in Michigan. So, just a really interesting guy my dad. And coming to these meetings
and seeing folks like Al Ellingboe. You know, people that knew my dad. It’s like family. It
really is familiar faces when you figure I’ve known these people or known of these people for
nearly twenty years. It’s pretty amazing.

BB: Well, now I’m thinking maybe I’ll start asking those questions too. So, what’s your--how
do you feel about where the chestnut foundation is right now, or do you have any advice for the
organization or hopes or concerns or fears, any of that kind of stuff?

TC: I think the biggest fear I have, and I think that was something that folks talked about today
in meetings was, ‘Gosh, I’m afraid people are going to get burned out.’ Burned out from the
standpoint that we have been--we go to the Pennsylvania farm show, which is a huge indoor
farm show. It’s in February, and for ten years, for fifteen years I’ve been telling people it’ll be ten years until we’ll have a chestnut. And people are really anxious, and they really want it. So, how do we handle that interest in a way that sustains it and can carry it to the next generation without disappointing people? And people are saying, Oh, you know they’re just—that’s a tough line to walk, because when you talk to people, they get tears in their eyes. Or you talk to hunter, and hunters know where the chestnuts are in the forest because they follow the game trails. And even though the chestnut has largely been gone as a mature tree, it still looms large in the minds of people that spend time outdoors. And I guess my fear is we need to keep that excitement going, we need to bring something, and we need to be able to bring this tree back to the forest.

And as a forester the other thing is that we’re pinning a lot of hope on the chestnuts just to restore the mast that we’re losing in our eastern forest with the loss of oak reproduction. And just as a surrogate for all the other problems that are going on in the forest. The one they brought up today was the hemlock woody adelgid. People are watching us. If we can pull this off, it’ll inspire hope for a lot of other species that are in trouble.

I don’t know. It’s a really wonderful project. One of the things that sort of keeps me going is just that bit of recognition going out, walking on a trail, and seeing a tree and saying, “By golly. You don’t belong here. The odds that you would endure this long aren’t that good, but there you are little guy.”

So, yeah busted. So, anyway I’m just blabbering.

BB: That’s great. Thank you.

TC: You’re welcome.