Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

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Interviewer: Bethany Baxter (and Jim Pfitzer)
Interviewee: Victor Davis
Interview Location: The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) 2008 annual meeting
Chattanooga, TN
Transcriber: Iliza Myers
BB: So, the first thing I also have to do is to give you a statement to make sure you know what we’re doing here: 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.

Have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

VD: Yes, I have.

BB: Great. Okay, now we’re official.

If you wouldn’t mind, just go ahead and tell me who you are, where you’re from, and any background information—what you do? That kind of stuff.

VD: Okay, my name is Victor Davis. I live in Seymour, TN and work for the office of surface mining in the Knoxville field office as a forester and graduated from UT forestry department with a B.S. degree in ’75 and went to work with O.S.M. shortly thereafter. I’ve been with O.S.M. for thirty years, and I love trees. Period. [laughs]

BB: Sounds good. Are there any stories that you are thinking about wanting to tell?

VD: Well, you know none of us really had ever saw the living American chestnut in their full grandeur, but I find sprouts all over my property. We have about fifteen acres there in the foothills of the Smokies, and find those sprouts quite frequently. And that’s exciting in itself just to see the leaves coming up and just imagine what they look like. I also find stumps scattered here and there. I hear all the stories people have told about the American chestnut, and I’d like to see it reclaim its dominant place in the forest.

BB: Any of those stories you’ve heard stick out in your mind?

VD: Well, I’ve got one story that I always liked. I can’t even remember who told it to me, but some old farmer somewhere said that when he was a boy that, you know, when the chestnut started falling that all the—-they turned the hogs out in the woods to eat the nuts, and he said they would always know when it was about time. They’d get all excited and be, you know, clawing
and trying to get out and everything. So, he said that they had this one hog that was the fastest and the smartest hog anybody had ever seen. He would always know in advance, and he always had one or two certain trees that he liked that as soon as he got out, he’d head for this one tree.

And so, this one year he said he thought he’d let him out a little bit early, and he let him out and he said sure enough that hog headed out to the one tree. He said he was so fast and smart that he could catch a chestnut on the first bounce. [laughs] So, anyway I like that story. But other than that I don’t really have any stories about it. You know all the things we’ve heard and read about in the books.

BB: Well, why did you decide to get involved in forestry, or how did that happen?

VD: I’ve always loved trees. That’s just been one of my passions since I was a young child. I don’t know how you know those things, but I just have a special place in my heart for trees in general and knew that’s what I wanted to do from an early age.

BB: Did you grow up in Seymour?

VD: I grew up in Knoxville, which is about probably ten, fifteen miles from Seymour, and I always loved the mountains. Spent a lot of time hiking, and my grandfather was a big naturalist, and he used to hike up in the Smokies before it was a park actually.

But yeah, that’s just always been a passion of mine, and you know, the thing that concerns me is I thank God for the American Chestnut Foundation, but that’s just one of many trees that are under attack now. I’ve got on my property a lot—or not a lot but several hemlocks and the adelgid is attacking them, and in fact I’ve got one right next to my house that just about died and I’m starting to treat it with merit and it seems to be helping a little bit, but it’s just depressing to see that. And then go up in Clingmans Dome and see the Fraser fir being taken down, and it’s just one after another. So I guess we can just bring them one back at a time. I don’t know.

BB: Well, when did you get involved with the Chestnut Foundation, and why did you decide to get involved?

VD: Uh, well actually it was through my work and through I think--basically the initial basic contact relationship was developed between Marshall Case and our director Brent Wahlquist.
And Brent is a real champion at forestry as well and has helped us develop this Appalachian region reforestation initiative, which is a group of people working to reestablish forest land on reclaimed mine sights. So, I guess that’s where the contact was initially made, and then I attended a state chapter meeting, I think it was in December of ’07 outside of Nashville and met all the folks there. It’s just been as fast paced since then. We’ve had several really neat projects that we worked together on in the past year and are really looking to do more of that.

BB: Are there any other kind of non-profit conservation, restoration type organizations that ya’ll worked with or is this just the big one?

VD: The Chestnut Foundation is probably one of the biggest restoration organizations that we’re working with. I can’t really think of any others that would be at that level.

BB: So, how many years have you been, I guess, a member of the Chestnut Foundation?

VD: Actually, I’m not a member, but I am going to join. After this I feel compelled to do that. I was telling my boss that yesterday. That’s something I really want to do and get more involved.

BB: From your experience being here and knowing what you know about the Chestnut Foundation do you have any sort of concerns or hopes or fears or advice type stuff--or the way that the program is going and everything, is there anything that sticks out in your mind that is particularly concerning or that is particularly promising or anything?

VD: I think in general that the program is very promising, but I think as far as the full scale implementation when these B3/F3 generation nuts become available for mass out plantings--if we’re going to do it on the mine sights, which is I think that’s part of the plan, then they need to be planted the same way all the other hardwood seedlings are, which is in the form of bare root seedlings.

We did an Arbor Day project last year and planted the nuts with the tree shelters and the stakes and all that, and it’s just so labor intensive and expensive for the materials. It’s just I don’t think it’s going to work, because all, like I said, all the other hardwood seedlings that we will be planting along with the chestnut are going to be planted as bare root seedlings.
The other thing that I will mention, although I know it’s a very touchy subject apparently, is this germplasm agreement. I really think that would be a major hindrance in full implementation because a lot of the landowners that we work with on these mine sites are small landowners. They don’t have legal representation. I don’t even think they would know what it meant or said. So, I believe that that’s something that needs to be seriously looked at. Maybe try to figure a better way of dealing with those issues, although I’m really not sure for certain what the issue is with it. I don’t know why. But anyway, I think that’s something that needs to be looked into and examined closely.

BB: That was kind of all the questions I was going to ask, but are there any other stories that stick out in your mind or experiences you’ve had?

VD: Um. Not really, not really. I just hope that some day I’ll be able to see these trees growing on the mine sites and be able to eat one or two of the nuts. [laughs]

JP: You said on your land you find a stump every now and then--

VD: Uh-huh.

JP: --and some small trees or shooting up from those? Have you found yet any standing, mature trees?

VD: No, none that are bearing fruit or even close to that. They get up maybe an inch or two in diameter and then they damp off.

BB: I guess that’s it. Thank you so much for your time.

VD: Okay. Well, thank you.