Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Interview date:
24-26 October 2008

Interviewer: Bethany Baxter (and Jim Pfitzer)

Interviewee: Jamie Donalds

Interview Location: The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) 2008 annual meeting
Chattanooga, TN

Transcriber: Iliza Myers
BB: Well, I pressed record. I have to give this statement too: 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?

JD: Yes.

BB: Okay, great. Now we’re set.

Do you want to just start to tell us who you are, where you’re from, just any sort of background information.

JD: Okay, my name is Jamie Donalds. I live in Lunenburg, Massachusetts. I grew up just outside of Boston. I first heard about the American chestnut when I was thirteen years old and I was at a summer camp called Berkshire Boys Camp. It’s no longer there in the metropolis and the Berkshires of the East Otis, Massachusetts. And we did a lot of hiking of the Appalachian trail up and down into Connecticut and up into Vermont, and during that summer--we do long thirteen or fifteen miles hikes over a couple of days, which is a lot for thirteen year olds. And we get to the crest of a certain hill, and we were taking a water break, which sometimes it felt like a forced march but that’s another story. A camp counselor was telling us about--giving us a little botany lesson about plants and how things worked and just pointing things out.

I was sitting next to a bush, and I asked him, “Well, what’s this bush?” And the look in his face was kind of sad. He said, “It’s not a bush.” And he started telling me the story of how it used to be the biggest tree in the forest and what happened. And some things I think mark you for life. You never forget.

So, thirty years go by. I’m engaged, and I’m buying a piece of land with my wife up in Lunenburg. And I’m sitting there talking to my father-in-law who’s an eighty-five year old cabinet maker, and he brought up American chestnut. We started talking about it, and he reminded me of how inspiring that story was, and having just bought twenty-two acres of property I said, “You know, I’m going to do something about this.” And it was certainly a whole
lot easier once I found the foundation. I says, “Well, I don’t have to do it alone. That’s much better.”

I searched out and showed up at an annual meeting in 2002 and said, “I want a chestnut orchard.” And they said, “Well, step right up. Have a seat.” And so, I helped the foundation in the last five years plant two or three or four thousand trees and became the president of the chapter.

JP: Can you go back to that moment up there on the mountain with your scout leader--

JD: My camp counselor.

JP: --or camp counselor. Obviously we all know what happened, but do you remember how he told the story?

JD: The way I remember it, and I think he had some inaccuracies, but he told it as that it used to be the biggest tree in the forest, and they all were attacked by a blight that was brought in from Asia. And if you could find one that was perfectly healthy in the wild, fully grown, it would be very valuable.

And I thought about that the entire--you know I hiked another eight miles that day, and I thought about that practically every step. About that night--I forgot what the tree looked like. I forgot even the name of it over time, but just the overall story stuck with me. And I couldn’t find--five years ago I couldn’t on a bet find chestnut in the woods. Now that’s all I see when I walk in the woods.

So, he told it--the thing I remember is telling me how valuable it would be and the kind of sad look on his face.

JP: Two things that a boy that age would really respond to.

JD: Yeah, that was--

JP: Probably unknowingly he got it just right, huh?

JD: Yeah, it’s a lesson for me that we don’t know the impact we have, you know. If he was trying to inspire me to do something about it, he may have thought he failed. [laughs] But thirty years later here I am sitting in Chattanooga because of it.
BB: Well, another thing we’ve been asking folks is--just thinking about the future of the organization and where we are, are there any concerns you have or hopes? Things that are particularly hopeful or things that are kind of a fear about where we’re going with the organization and the whole program?

JD: Um, the biggest challenge--you know I think of it as a chapter president--the biggest challenge that I have is that people are very generous at a state level and a national level although the focus is so much on money and getting money. We’re doing okay. The biggest challenge is having people join and be active. I think that’s true about just every chapter. There’s a small core. We have almost five hundred people--four hundred, five hundred people active in Massachusetts, but the core of people who are actually on the ground doing work is small. It’s maybe fifty, and so we try to get the most out of the people we have and use that money as a leverage to be the most effective we can. So the biggest issue is having people involved and getting people on the ground who are willing to do--to be inspired and do the work. So, that’s the biggest challenge.

BB: What do you mean ‘work’?

JD: The work--for right now we’re finished up planting twenty eight orchards. The next step is as the orchards become mature and mature enough to select that they are injected with blight--they’re inoculated and graded and it’s documented and all of that work to select all the trees we’ve planted for the next generation. And the other piece is figuring out how in Massachusetts we’re going to plant nine acres of chestnut trees with volunteers. That’s daunting.

JP: Clearly you were very inspired from a very young age, and you said the problem now at the organization level is how to inspire volunteers. So, given how you were inspired what do you do as chapter president to inspire people? Do you use those same methods? Are you telling them stories, or are you--what are you doing?

JD: It’s an easy story for people to buy into, and I’ve asked people to become members and come to a chapter meeting. It’s like one out of five people who joins becomes active.

JP: Sounds like a pretty good--
JD: It’s not bad, but my main concern is I have a really talented group of people with a broad background who have experience in lots of different areas that make our chapter very sound. My biggest worry is burning them out, and I don’t want to abuse their dedication. I’d rather do things to keep inspiring them and make them more effective, so the people I have working with me I don’t need to inspire any more, but I try to. It’s getting new people involved and getting a strong ongoing group of people and holding on to who we have for members. But you know that’s spoken like a chapter president not like a--

JP: [laughs] I’m afraid you have no choice but to speak like that.

JD: Pretty much. For right now, that’s pretty much where I’m at.

BB: Are there any other stories or memories that other people have told you over the years or in the time that you’ve been at TACF--or any stories about the organization that stick out in your mind?

JD: I’ve heard a lot of stories. I’m sure some of them aren’t true.

JP: That’s okay. We’d like to hear those, too.

JD: Um, no. Nothing that’s cohesive in my head that I can hand to you.

BB: Well, is there anything else you want to get out there?

JD: I’m good. I think that’s it.

BB: Okay. Well, we really appreciate your time.