BB: Also, I have to 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 an effort to promote a better understanding of the role of the American chestnut.

So, have you signed the participant identification and release agreement?

GH: Yes, I have.

BB: Okay, great.

So, first just tell me who you are, where you’re from, and what you do. Some background information on you.

GH: I’m Geoffrey Lee Hill. I’m a forester from Athens, Georgia, and I work for ArborGen, LLC. I’m the southeastern seedling sales coordinator. So, I sell tree seedlings in about fourteen states for reforestation, restoration, wetlands mitigation, wildlife habitat enhancement. Things such as this.

B: So, what motivated you to get involved with the Chestnut Foundation?

GH: Well, I guess it’s kind of been a full circle, because when I was in forestry school in West Virginia when I was a freshman, my freshman roommate actually brought a bag of chestnuts to eat after they began to fall at his home in Janely, West Virginia back in October 1975. Of course, they were sweet, they were small, they were the real deal. And this was a yard tree, and he’d grown up with it. And he talked about his father actually herding hogs as a young man in the mountains of West Virginia for several weeks at a time to fatten them up, and that was an every day kind of rights of passage. I thought that was pretty fascinating.

Of course, in forestry work in West Virginia at that time, you still saw a lot of stump sprouts. At that time University of West Virginia was getting involved with studies with Dr. McDonald with Roy Keys as his technician trying to find the magic bullet to try to bring it back. So, it was just a real exciting time. It was kind of early research back then. Also, a lot of folks were working with hypovirulent strains to fight the virulence strains one on one. They’d actually had some
success with that and at the time it was kind of like a drop in the bucket, but it was heading in the right direction.

And so I was involved with getting out of school in forestry and being around chestnuts. And then to make a living I logged for about nine months. We were in a big recession in general in 1980, and I got a permanent position as a professional forester in eastern Virginia. And so, I kind of got away from the mountains, and I was transferred to Georgia in ’85 and have been involved with different facets of forestry since then.

And then for about twenty two years, and then as fate would have it our business was purchased by ArborGen LLC in November of last year, and it’s interesting that ArborGen had been doing a lot of the biotech work behind the scenes with chestnut research. We help support help with Syracuse and the University of Georgia as well as some in house stuff. So, I guess it’s kind of been a full circle, and so I’m delighted to be here as a part of the twenty-fifth anniversary and kind of be back in the fold again.

BB: So, are you from West Virginia? Did you grow up there?

GH: Right on the border. Shenandoah valley in Frederick County, Virginia.

BB: So, did you not grow in a rural area like your roommate did?

GH: It was a small town at that time and not as rural as my roommate Butch, but we were in the chestnut range at that time too. And that part of the world still saw stump sprouts in Frederick County.

BB: That’s great. Is there any other stories or memories you have from either chestnut trees or anything like that or the Chestnut Foundation? Stories that stick out in your mind?

GH: I guess there’s two things. One’s kind of off the wall, one’s kind of neat. In 1977 I was up in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania area, and I found a blanket chest at a flea market. It was solid American chestnut before the blight, and it’s got one seventeen inch board on top. It’s probably about twenty inches overall, without a knot on it. And it’s simple, basic, but it’s beautiful. And that’s the deal, to think about the timber that yielded lumber like that. And I’ve got it in our bedroom and to me, that’s where we want to get back to.
So, that’s kind of inspirational, and I guess the off-the-wall part is there are so many different stumps around where you get some coppice regeneration. So, when I was in forestry school, I took a piece of that stump and I carved this guy, this head— I call him Mr. Chestnut. [laughs] It was my creative experience. So, anyway Mr. Chestnut sits in my wood shed, and he’s got this smile on his face, but his eyes are closed. So, the deal is he’s waiting for them to come back.

BB: I like that! So, you’re saying that’s an old stump you found out in the woods?

GH: Uh-huh.

BB: Wow. That’s cool. So, ArborGen does tree seedling--what is motivating them to do this chestnut work?

GH: We’re the large supplier of reforestation stock in the world, and we’re really committed to forestry and trees in general. So, we’re working with Longleaf Restoration, with Atlantic White Cedar Restoration, and Chestnut. It’s all really important.

BB: So, it’s like reclaimed land kind of thing?

GH: Uh, the whole gamut. Atlantic White Cedar might be on the coast of North Carolina on an area that maybe was harvested forty years ago and came back to Red Maple and Sweet gum, but it was Atlantic White Cedar prior to that. Now there’s interest in folks actually coming back and restoring it, harvesting that, and putting it back into Atlantic White Cedar.

BB: Is that private or public interest?

GH: It’s just starting. Right now there’s some private folks getting involved, but the Fish and Wildlife service folks like that. On the Longleaf end of things, I think Atlantic White Cedar awareness to the restorations about where Longleaf was maybe sixteen years ago.

The Longleaf program is getting huge. A lot of awareness, a lot of people have gotten on board. Now getting involved with the chestnut again after so many years I see the same passion. The people here are from a really wide geographic area, but the same seed is here. Everybody is on fire about it.
JP: Somebody mentioned earlier about the chestnut working really well in reclamation efforts where mining has disturbed things. They’re finding they don’t even have to level and resurface that they just take root in the piles of rubble and do well in that situation. Is that something that you in your supply that you’ve come across that kind of effort, that kind of success?

GH: We do a lot of support behind the scenes growing seedlings for mine reclamation and have just kind of quietly done that. So we’re real excited about that, and we just signed an agreement with the Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative I guess about three weeks ago as a partner, so we really support that.

JP: Very good.

GH: We think as far as a land management idea it’s sound, and we really like the idea of reforesting the Appalachian Mountains and getting away from the traditional three pass grass it over pasture land scenario. So the fact that the ACF wants to bring chestnut back into that picture, we think it’s wonderful.

JP: You mention that as a child you had the stumps and rings and the sprouts. When you would see those things as a child, were there stories attached to them that your parents or other adults would tell you about from those stumps? When they saw them, did they evoke memories in them that they would want to tell you?

GH: I probably was more aware of it in forestry school.

JP: Okay, so it was later on.

GH: That really triggered it. Especially having my roommate being around it and still being a live resource. It wasn’t second generation or anecdotal, it was for real. It was right there in your face. So, that made it real exciting. Once you dug a little deeper, then you said well, here’s a twelve inch tree in his yard, but then you out in the woods and saw a twenty four inch stump. And then of course all the logging photos from the teens and all.

BB: Well, one other things we’ve been asking folks is do you have any concerns or hopes or fears about the breeding program and just the kind of future that you see the Chestnut Foundation moving towards?
GH: No, I think it’s pretty neat. I think there’s kind of two different schools of thought: one with the biotech route and then one with backcrossing. And I think the thing is to be a unified front to find out the solution for that blight resistant tree. And then, I mean roll it out in a big way. And I think it’s going to be a success story in our lifetime. I really do.

BB: Well, is there anything else that you can think of that comes to mind? Stories that you want to tell?

GH: I think that’s it.

BB: Well, thank you so much. I appreciate that.

GH: I appreciate it. Thank you for letting me be a part of it.