Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Interview date:
24-26 October 2008

Interviewer: Bethany Baxter
Interviewee: Harold Kemp
Interview Location: The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) 2008 annual meeting
Chattanooga, TN

Transcriber: Iliza Myers
BB: I just pressed record, and then also I have to give you this statement saying: 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 role of the American chestnut.

Have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

HK: Yes, I have.

BB: Okay, great. So now tell me exactly what you just told and make sure you include who you are and where you’re from.

HK: My name’s Harold Kemp. I was born in 1937 in Smith County, Tennessee, which is county seat is Carthage, Tennessee. It’s about sixty miles east of Nashville. I was raised about halfway between Carthage and Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee in a little community called Pleasant Shade.

As a young man, a young boy growing up in the forties we didn’t have any television or any Nintendo’s. I had to entertain myself in the woods, so I was trapping for mink and muskrats down on the creek, and sometimes I’d catch a coon down around the creek. Up on the hills I was looking for foxes and opossums and whatever I could find. And the woods had all these ol’ big dead trees in them and they fascinated me. Just these great big ol’ stumps. So I asked my granddaddy. I start talking to him about them. His name was Jeff Kemp. He served in the state legislature in Tennessee, and I remember at one time it was ’47 to ’49 or something.

But anyway, he would tell me about these trees, and he said when he was young--he was born in 1881. When he was a young man he and his daddy and his brother cut one. Took them three days to cut it with--just had one axe and one old saw, and he said when they got it down, he could lay down on the stump, and he was six foot six inches tall, and there was a foot hanging off on either side of him. So the trees always fascinated me. I never saw a live one. They were all dead. There would be some sprouts and things, but they would just die.

So, in 1990 I got a hold of a copy of a National Geographic, and there was an article in it about the American Chestnut Society trying to bring them back. I’d always been fascinated with them,
so I immediately contacted those people, and I joined and I’ve been a member ever since. I guess that’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

BB: Sounds good. So, if you had to point to one thing that motivated you to get involved, what would it be?

HK: Well, it was all those ol’ big dead trees that was in the woods when I was a kid. Now, down here where I lived was in the Cumberland Valley. I was raised down in the Cumberland Valley, but the ridges above us was up on the Highland rim. So we were down here; we were about four hundred, four hundred and fifty foot above sea level. When you were up there, you was nine hundred to a thousand feet above sea level. Up on the ridges was where all these big trees were. All these ol’ big dead trees snags, and during the ‘40s while the world war two was going on, they got to cutting those things and they called it--I can’t think of what they called it, but they would cut it--It was dyewood! They called it dyewood. And now, I had no idea what it was, but the loggers would come through and cut those, and they said it was making stuff to dye the clothes for the army soldier boys. I don’t know if that’s true or not, but they cut about all of them and hauled them off, all those big snags.

BB: Sounds good. That wasn’t painful, was it?

HK: No, no.