Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Interview date:
24-26 October 2008

Interviewer: Bethany Baxter
Interviewee: Grace Knight
Interview Location: The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) 2008 annual meeting
Chattanooga, TN
Transcriber: Iliza Myers
BB: Now we’re recording.

GK: Yes, ma’am.

BB: I have to tell you this statement so you know what we’re doing. So everything’s all out in the open.

GK: Yes, ma’am.

BB: 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?

GK: Yes, I have.

BB: Wonderful. We’re legal now.

So, maybe just start telling me your name, where you’re from, just a little background information on Grace Knight.

GK: Hi, I’m Grace Spencer Knight, and I am from Wethersfield, Vermont and my ancestors came up the Connecticut River and settled on the New Hampshire side in the 1750s. And of course, you all know that the Vermont side wasn’t safe for settlement until the last French and Indian war ended in 1761. And then the settlers just poured across the Connecticut River and bought land in the land grants on the Vermont side. And my ancestors were the Spencer family that settled Spencer Hollow on the edge of Skitchewaug Mountain near Springfield, Vermont, and that whole slope of Skitchewaug Mountain western facing slope leading down to Spencer Brook, was covered with chestnut trees, and there is still a cluster of sprouts at the bottom of Skitchewaug Mountain that still flowers. It flowers, it dies back, then it grows back up in twenty, twenty-five more years, it’ll flower again.
And now I live about ten miles from Spencer Hollow. I live in Wethersfield, Vermont. I do a lot of volunteer work for the Wethersfield Historical Society, and one of our most common inquires is people looking to do their genealogy and research their ancestors.

And you probably know that Vermont has no topsoil. All our topsoil left 15,000 years ago when the last glacier came through. So, what people tend to do if they’re from Vermont is leave. So we have tremendous number of inquiries from the Midwest, from Texas, from Oregon and California, Washington State to look up their early ancestors.

And the difficulty of it is that we have had a town office since 1761. We have the old books on parchment where it’s all hand written, but our first book goes from 1761 to 1795 and the title of that book is “Earmarks, births, marriages and deaths.” And in that book the Earmarks are three quarters of it, and you know what the earmark is. It’s how you carve to the ear of your hog, so that when you send it out to eat the chestnut, if somebody claimed it, you could say, “No, that’s my hog.”

Now in those days it was just virgin forest primeval wilderness. These settlers might build a ten by twelve foot cabin. They could clear very little land per year. They were people in a hurry, and our town is six miles by six miles. So it’s thirty six square miles. So to make that trip down to the town office in Ascutneyville, Vermont on the bank of the Connecticut River, you just never made that trip. You did not make it to say you were married and write that down. You did not make it to write down the births of your children. So all these inquires I get, three quarters of them I have to write back, and I have to say, “Now I’m sure that your ancestor got married, and I’m sure that your ancestor had children. I have no record of it, but let me tell you your ancestor’s earmark. I can tell you what they carved into the ear of every hog before they let them out to forage for the chestnut. And that’s all I can tell you from 1761 to 1795. That’s the only time your ancestor ever came to the town office was to write that down.” [laughs]

BB: That’s so--

JP: Wow, I guess that’s a livelihood. That’s far more important of a record of your--

GK: --than if they just married and had babies.

JP: Right.
BB: Wow, that’s really interesting.

JP: Wow.

GK: So, that’s my chestnut story.

BB: That’s a great story.

So, how did you get into chestnuts? Is that how you first kind of learned about it?

GK: No, not at all. My husband is from the south. He grew up in St. Petersburg, Florida, but his mother’s family is all from Bath County, Virginia the village of Warm Springs in Bath County. And that’s very close to the Virginia, West Virginia line. And so he spent all his childhood summers at his grandmother’s house in Warm Springs. His aunt now owns that house and runs it as a bed and breakfast, but there’s an old chestnut shed on that property behind his grandmother’s house. And when he was about right out of college, maybe about twenty three, twenty four, he had a notion that we would make our fortunes because we would reclaim the wood from this old chestnut shed and plane it down and resell it. Well, we never made our fortune on it, because those were thin weathered boards, and there was no value in them at all. [laughs]

JP: You could have made paper.

GK: Yeah, we could have made paper out of that shit. [laughs]

But in any case, he got really interested in the chestnut and how hard it was when all those trees died right in the middle of the depression and how if had effected his grandparents. So he’s always been involved in the chestnut foundation. He brought me along.

I also want to say something for history. In the area of Springfield and Wethersfield, Vermont the chestnuts all died between about 1929 and 1932. That’s when the blight came to us and hit us. And there’s a lady named Dot Stankovitch who lives in Wethersfield on Grout Lane. Her ancestors were Grouts. And that’s at the bottom of a hill called Eagle’s Head, and it’s another western facing slope. It’s above Vermont Route 31 and above the Black River, and when Dot was a girl, she would have been born about 1925. So, she’d be in her mid-eighties now. When Dot was a girl, she remembers--no, she would have been born in about 1930. I’m sorry. She
remembers that whole hillside of Eagle Head covered with skeleton trees. Just the white, dead skeletons, and her mother who grew up in that same house that she grew up in, remembered going out as a girl and gathering baskets and baskets of chestnuts.

BB: Yeah, I’ve heard other people call the--use that word skeleton or graveyard.

GK: Yeah.

BB: Yeah, standing ghosts I’ve heard people call it. It’s like--

GK: Yeah, well it happened in Vermont too.

JP: Did people talk about the fact that this happened there at the same time of the great stock market crash and all that at the same time? What a huge--

GK: You know, I’m going to tell you--I’ll be truthful. I’m going to tell you that Vermont was a little different, because at that time we had tremendous water power and that whole area was a machine tool manufacturing center, so even though it was the depression, the machine tool companies, the gear shaper, and the other machine tool companies were really gearing up and hiring more and more men. So, even if you left off farming, you could get a good job in town. So, it didn’t have that kind of economic devastation in my little part of Vermont.

And the other thing that it might be a little shameful to say, but what moved all in and replaced it all was the sugar maple. And we in Vermont, we love our sugar maple and it’s also food producing tree. And in fact, it’s a better cash crop for us than the chestnut, because the one thing that you can reliably do all March every March is sugar, and that’s good money. And it’s still--my husband and I sugar to this day, and it’s a very profitable thing to do.

JP: Wow, so you resisted everything as a community. You resisted the loss of the chestnuts. You resisted the depression.

GK: I mean we’re kind of down on our heels now. All that machine tool manufacturing has gone to Japan and Korea and China. That’s all gone, and you can’t much make a living sugaring. Whatever. [laughs]

BB: So, how long have you been a member of the chestnut foundation?
GK: Well, my husband and I joined probably about eleven years ago.

BB: Um, another question I think is interesting to ask folks is: So, here we are at the twenty-fifth annual meeting and talking about the future. What are some of your own hopes or fears or concerns or just kind of thoughts about where we are in the breeding program?

GK: You know, this isn’t something we do for ourselves. This is something we do for our children and grandchildren, and it would be my dream that my grandchildren would be able to gather chestnuts from the woods.

BB: Yeah, it’s wild to be talking about how it’s not the twenty year plan but the thousand year plan.

GK: Yeah, it’s a lot longer than twenty years.

BB: Is there any other stories or memories that spring--

GK: Nope.

BB: All right.

GK: Thank you so much.