Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Interview date:
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Interviewer:  Bethany Baxter (and Jim Pfizter)
Interviewee:  Randall Smith
Interview Location:  The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) 2008 annual meeting
                Chattanooga, TN
Transcriber:  Iliza Myers
BB: The first thing I also have to do is give you this statement telling you what we’re doing: 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 tree.

Have you signed the participant identification and release agreement?

RS: I have.

BB: Okay, great. Now we’re ready to roll. We’re official.

Will you start just telling me your name, where you’re from, what you do? Just background information.

RS: My name’s Randall Smith, and I was born in Jackson County, Alabama in the town of Bridgeport, which is in the very extreme northeast corner of Alabama and on the Tennessee River. And I had lived there all my life except for seven years at college. I went to Auburn University and graduated in the school of Veterinary Medicine, and I’m a mixed animal practitioner in Jackson County now.

I’ve been doing that. I’ve been interested in chestnuts all my life. My grandfather on my father’s side said that--he had fourteen children, so before the chestnuts disappeared when they were real young, they took a model T Ford truck and would park under one of these giant trees and fill the truck up with--chestnuts were a source of food for them with fourteen. Anyhow, that was on that side.

And then on my mother’s side my grandfather there was a farmer, and he sold cars at one time and then a real estate agent later on. In 1968 I was given a job by my father to keep me out of trouble. I was sixteen years old, and I had to tear a fence row out and replace it with a new fence. And I started this project, which was right on the side of the road, and I was taking out the old fence. There was these fence posts that were very hard, and they were old. You could tell by the weathering on the outside, but inside when I pulled the staples out, they were like really firm. You could knock the dirt off of them, and you could tell they were solid.
So, I had a pile of really good posts, and then I had a pile of cedar that were breaking off and I burned those. But I kept these others, because I didn’t know what they were. So I had a big stack of them, and I thought about burning them, and I said, “No, some of these are so good, I’m going to use them.” They weren’t going to be my brace posts.

So, my grandfather comes by on my mother’s side, and he says--he was born in 1897. At sixteen or eighteen years of age in like 1913 or 15 before he was drafted into the army for the big war, he had put that fence in. He had built that fence, and he said, “You know what these are that you’ve got stacked over here?”

And I said, “No, I don’t have a clue. I just know that the wood when you take a knife or a hatchet and cut into them was like really oily.” You could tell it was just--I had never seen anything like it.

He said, “Those are American chestnut. I split those rails and cut those fence posts when I was your age.”

BB: That’s great.

RS: So, that’s sort of how I got interested.

BB: When did you join the chestnut foundation?

RS: I think it’s been three years. I didn’t know they existed, but I thought that was really neat.

JP: Did your grandfather share any other stories with you?

RS: Just that--a lot of stories but not necessarily chestnut related. They lived off the land pretty much back then. His father had surveyed the Tennessee Alabama line there, and they lived for months and months in the mountains surveying the Tennessee Alabama line, really from Sewanee all the way into the Georgia line. He did all of that surveying, and they would stay in the woods for six, seven months, so he had a lot of--the chestnut tree was really important, and that would have been, I think, in the 1870’s or something that he did that.

BB: Wow, that’s neat.
RS: They lived into those chestnuts when they were still very healthy and active. We just have a lot of things. Several of my family have restored old log cabins. Of course, a lot of those logs were American chestnut.

BB: Why did you decide to get involved with the chestnut foundation? What kind of motivated you to get involved?

RS: I just like the idea of restoring that--of course I deal with farm animals and small animals and exotics. I do everything. I’ve always tended to things. My daughter’s carrying a little squirrel in her pocket today that we’ve doctored. She won’t leave.

BB: [laughs] I want to see that.

RS: Anyway, that’s my story basically. I built my granddaughter a rocky horse, and my aunt had given me a--she had a mountain cabin redone up here on Signal Mountain, and it had a lot of chestnut logs in it. And they had taken some of those. One of the rooms, they had to shorten it, so I got some of the chestnut ends off of some of the logs that they had shortened the room. And I built her a seat on a rocky horse out of this chestnut. That cabin was two hundred years old probably, so that log was at least two hundred years old. They may have pulled it out of another cabin and used it, you know.

But anyhow, it just made a beautiful piece of wood. Of course, you’ve seen some of the bow doors and the panels and stuff, how pretty of a wood it is. So, that’s another generation that’s got a story.

JP: Is there anything else that you’ve made out of that wood?

RS: No, I haven’t.

JP: Do you still have any of it?

RS: I still have some of it, yes. When somebody has an old log cabin that they’re redoing and I find out there’s some chestnut, I keep it. I have a lot. We went to the Joyce Kilmer National Forest up here, and we found some old chestnut stumps, logs up there that are still some of that wood. And I could still find them at home in that gap between Stevenson and Monteagle.
BB: The Lost Cove up there?

RS: The Lost Cove and all up in those areas there’s still trunks of those trees laying in the forest.

BB: Do you have any sort of concerns or hopes or fears about the restoration process and kind of the future with the organization? Anything specific that you’d like to say?

RS: No, we’ve got a thousand year plan. That sounds like we’re in it for the long haul.

BB: It is pretty amazing to talk about that kind of a scale.

RS: Yeah. The restoration idea I believe in. I’m a New Testament Christian, and that restoration of New Testament Christianity is my religion and this idea of restoring this tree back to its prominence just intrigues me. I’ve gone nuts I guess as my wife says.

JP: Can you better explain or clarify that connection between New Testament Christian and the work of--

RS: Well, you know we had the reformation back, but I say why reform something just go back to what it was in the beginning, and that’s what I’d like to see with the chestnut tree. When I go overseas--I was in a rig in India right after the tsunami, and that’s what we were doing over there. We were just going into those fishing villages and just bringing some relief. But anyhow that’s what I’ve done religiously, and I do a lot of mission work. I like the idea of restoring that, and I’d like to see this tree restored.

I was close to my grandparents, and they taught me what that tree was and what this tree was, but we didn’t have any chestnuts left. And we’d hear stories of sprouts, and somebody found some nuts up on the mountain but I never got to--always as a little kid I wanted to find that tree and see it.

JP: It’s like looking for a Sasquatch, isn’t it?

RS: Yeah, it sure is. But now I have some trees growing on the mountain on the Tennessee line. I own a little property, and I’ve got some trees growing now that I’ve planted, so they’re back in the mountains in the beginning where they started.

JP: What’s the biggest one you’ve got?
RS: They’re just all young. I’ve got a pound of nuts off of some trees at my clinic that I got out of Pennsylvania. There about eight years old.

BB: Any other memories that come to--?

RS: No, just talks. You know, they would talk. Big families just sit around and talk, and they would talk about roasting chestnuts by the open fire, they fed the hogs chestnuts, they fed everything. That sort of sustained the poor. And I can remember coming up here to the tanning-right down the road here to the tannery. You know, there was a big tannery here. Well, people in my area would strip those chestnut logs and bring that up here, and I can still smell that tannic acid smell. You know, you don’t smell it when you go by there anymore, but when I was a kid, you came by there, you could smell it. And that was some of the people in my area: the poor indigenous farmer, sharecroppers, and all that. It was a money source for them to bring that bark of that tree up here. I heard those stories about bad times about how that tree just provided so many different things for so many people. I think at one time, that was the major source of the tanning that they used to tan the hides was the chestnut tree.

BB: That’s right.

RS: But stories about preparing chestnuts and roasting them by the open fire, getting up and taking them to school for breakfast. You know, they filled their pocket. A sweet potato in one pocket and some chestnuts in the other. That sort of thing.

BB: Great. Well, thank you so much.

RS: Well, you’re welcome.

BB: I appreciate that.