BB: Okay, the first thing I have to--


BB: Oh, yeah don’t forget that part.

JP: Let me turn on the mic.

DW: Where do you want it?

BB: Wherever. It’ll--

JP: For the record I’m not a republican. If we can get that on tape.

BB: Okay, the first thing I have to do is tell you what we’re doing: The key objective of this interview is to serve as a research tool to document memories of 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 agreement?

DW: I have.

BB: Okay, great. Now we’re official.

Do you want to just start by telling us who you are, where you’re from, just any background information we need to know about you.

DW: Okay. My name is Donald C. Willeke. W-I-L-L-E-K-E. I am an attorney in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In about 1974 I was chairman of the mayor’s commission on city tax revenues in Minnesota, and in the process I looked out of the window of the IDS tower where I had my offices and saw that the entire city was covered with elms. I also knew that they were beginning to die from Dutch elm disease, so I started to raise the dickens about the whole thing. And in thirty four years ago in the month--in October of 1974 I became the first chair of Minnesota’s Urban Forest Council and helped get about sixty or seventy million dollars in state aid to the
communities to deal with the crisis of Dutch elm disease, which was very expensive and to plant new trees. What does this have to do with chestnut? Well, I’ll tell you in a minute.

Amongst the people that I worked with and relied on were the tree experts at the University of Minnesota. Dr. David French, the head of the department of plant pathology and a noted expert on Dutch elm disease and Oak wilt, and a number of others like Dr. Harold Pellet at the University of Minnesota landscape arboretum. And quite a few others. In the process of my work with these people and as chair of Minnesota’s Urban Forest Council and testifying before the legislature and getting testimony from Dr. French and others, we talked about other things beside just elms, and one of them was chestnut. And I asked Dr. French about chestnut blight because I’d read about it, and I’d always been interested in trees. My father used to take me for walks in the woodland just west of the small Iowa town where I grew up. A little town called Aplington, Iowa, and I love the big oaks out there, but I was always fascinated with the story of the American chestnut and its great loss.

One day in about 1981 Dr. French said to me as we were talking about chestnut or going somewhere to speak on elm problems throughout the state and dealing with urban forestry programs. I don’t know how it came up, but we got to talking about chestnut, and Dr. French said to me, “You know, there are a bunch of us meeting over at the university to do something about the American chestnut.”

And I said, “You guys?”

And he said, “Yes.”

I said, “This is Minnesota.”

And he said, “Yes, well nobody seems to be doing anything and what the USDA did was apparently wrong.”

And I said, “Who?”

And he said, “Oh, Charlie Burnham who’s a retired professor of plant pathology”—or plant breeding and who actually was one of the people who developed hybrid corn in the 1920s along with Henry A. Wallace who later became vice president of the United States.
And I says, “And Norman Borlaug? That Norman Borlaug?”

And he said, “Yes, that Norman Borlaug.”

I knew that Dr. Borlaug had received the novel peace prize in 1971. Not the science prize, but the peace prize for developing what came to be known as the green revolution that allowed China and India and some of the other portions of the world to feed themselves. Whereas, before that I’m old enough that I remember when there was starvation in India and China. Some of it politically caused, but a lot of it simply because they didn’t grow crops sufficient to feed the people.

And so, in response to Dr. French’s invitation, I joined this group. Kind of sat still for awhile because I was a lawyer and didn’t understand all of the plant stuff, but we had several meetings, and at some of those I heard of Dr. Burnham’s experiments and the fact that he’d done a bunch of chestnut crosses and what his theory was, and I think others have told you this, what his theory was as to why the United States Department of Agriculture’s efforts to get around the chestnut blight in the 20s and 30s failed. They had out-crossed once to Chinese and not got enough resistance, and so they crossed the Chinese again and they got a tree that was even more Chinese, short and small and not able to withstand our climates or the height of our woodlands. The trees would be canopied over, as the technical term. And he said that Burnham and Borlaug had been looking at that, and they said, Gee, this isn’t what we do with corn and wheat. When we have a desirable plant that has a flaw, we outcross once to something that doesn’t have the flaw and then we backcross repeatedly to the plant that does have the flaw, but we only advance those that picked up the resistance to the flaw that may be in the case of rice, rice that gets too tall and falls over. So they’d outcross it once to a short strain of rice, but then back cross it to get the large grains or the good bearing that the good strain that fell over in the water had. He says, “That’s what Burnham proposes to do with the chestnut.”

In the process I met Phil Rutter who also was fascinated with it and was a student of Dr. Burnham’s, and of course, met Dr. Borlaug. And I met a number of other scientists like Dr. Ron Phillips who was an imminent plant geneticist and later became the senior scientific advisor to the United States Department of Agriculture. The top Agricultural scientist in effect in the country--or the ranking agricultural scientist in the country.
But in any event, in one of those meetings I heard that they were doing these breedings back and forth. Some of the trees that Dr. Burnham had put out with a friend of his at Oberlin College had been paved over with a parking lot, and they were lost. Some other trees that had been planted at some park some place in the South had also been lost. They had just been mowed down or not taken care of. And I said “Well gentleman, I’ve sat here as a non-scientist and listened to you for quite awhile, but what you really need is, if you’re going to do this effort, is to establish a foundation, a non-profit corporation that can solicit funds and get control of some land in perpetuity to handle this problem.

And they said, Oh. And they said, Can you do that? And I said, “Well, yeah I’ve set up non-profit corporations. I helped establish the tree trust in Minneapolis that employs about a thousand young people every summer to do community improvement work while teaching them job skills. And I’ve done it for other organizations. By and by we did determine in our meetings in late ’82 or early ’83 to establish a non-profit corporation, and I drew up the legal documents, the articles of incorporation, and by laws, and naming the first board of directors, which included Mr. Rutter and Dr. French, and Dr. Burnham, and Dr. Borlaug, and Dr. Philips, and a number of others--all scientists. And I signed it on June 22, 1983--my forty third birthday, which tells you how old I am today twenty five years later, and some months later.

But as a result, I became not only the incorporator and one of the initial members of the board of directors, but when the board of directors met they elected me as the secretary of the foundation. And I kept the minutes for the first few years, and Dr. French was the first treasurer. He was later succeeded by Dr. McDonald, whom you just interviewed. We had meetings in Minnesota, and in the fall of 1983 we had our first annual meeting of the Minnesota landscape arboretum. I think there were probably a fully twenty people in attendance. Our first budget was $5,000 that Dr. Burnham himself donated and the rest of us kicked in a few bucks here and there and paid our own expenses, which we always have. That’s actually more money than I’ve given to just about any other organization. Coming to these meetings isn’t cheap.

We talked about putting out some sort of a publication, and I said, “Well, I just got a new Lisa,” which was a computer that existed before Apple computer developed the Macintosh. And I said I could probably help do it. And to make a long story short, the first several issues, editions of the Journal of the American Chestnut Foundation were typed right here by these ten fingers. So,
I tell people that this is a national historic site--the two fingers that signed the articles of incorporation and the ten fingers that typed the first three or so issues of the journal. And then, I just typed them on the Macintosh and set them up, and then we had them photocopied and bound.

So, in that capacity I worked for some time. I got very busy a little later not only with my law practice, but as first vice president then president of American forests, the nation’s oldest forestry organization, and a member of the federal urban forestry commission and chairman of the national urban forest council. So, in the early ‘90s I was still a director of the foundation but wasn’t quite that active, but later I was asked to be, when they set up the cabinet structure of the foundation I was asked to be the vice president for science then, now it’s vice chairman for science. They moved everything up a notch and spent three years as chair of the science cabinet, in which case I had to engage in the cat herding job, herding cats trying to get the scientists to agree on something. And getting any group of scientists to agree on anything is a little difficult.

I later became secretary again and was secretary for a number of years, but throughout the entire history of the foundation, a quarter of a century that it’s been in existence, I have been its legal council and I’ve served on the board of directors. We’ve been through a lot of tough times. We’ve been saved financially more than once by Brad Stanback and his family, and I think you’ve heard that name. He’s a wonderful and terribly modest man of considerable means. He and his father have--his father went to school in Omaha with a guy by the name of Warren Buffet. Yeah, well they got in the ground floor. But Brad is very bright, very dedicated he and his wife Shelley, and they’ve saved us more than once from financial disaster. But under the leadership of first Mr. Rudder and others--Phil Rudder went out and scrounged for funds everywhere and did all the work himself and finally got space on a farm in Virginia to be given to us, and he brought the chestnut material we had in Minnesota out here one spring in his car. Had to take it into his hotel to keep it from freezing overnight, stuff that had been raised in a greenhouse, and in I think, 1991 we established our first farm, the Wagner farm, which the Wagner family leased to us. And now we’re actually buying most of that farm from them. And we’ve had good times and bad in the foundation. Some years the budgets were very tight, but we’ve continued to work on the cross breeding.
One interesting thing was that when we started this thing we estimated that it would take until about the year 2040, the year I turn 100 for the foundation to get to the point where they are intercrossing the F2’s of the third backcross, but we’re here right now. We’re at that point right now thirty two years ahead of where we thought we’d be, so in twenty five years, we’ve accomplished what we thought it would take us fifty seven years to accomplish, and it’s a wonderful thing to see. And that’s largely due to the extremely hard work and dedication of Dr. Fred Hebard, and the scientists that have worked with him, but basically Fred Hebard figuring how to accelerate the breeding process. Breeding trees is a tough thing, but they’ve found how to cut the intergenerational time way down.

So, I’ve been truly amazed by many of the things that I’ve seen. I’ve also been amazed by seeing the research that’s been done on hypovirulence in effect, causing a sexually transmitted disease to be imparted into the chestnut blight that weakens it. Chestnut blight strains have to cross with each other. They can reproduce sexually and asexually, but when they reproduce sexually. Well, you all know about STDs, and even chestnut blight has STDs and it makes them sick and debilitates them so they can’t do the damage that they want to do. That’s a fascinating thing.

Other fascinating things have been how to get the chestnuts to grow. When I was vice chairman or vice president then, now vice chairman for science, I saw how fast things were moving, much faster than I thought. I said, “Shoot, we don’t even know how to get this tree out in the woods! We don’t know the silviculture of this thing, and we have to work on that.” And one of the things that I’m proud of during my term as vice president of science and head of the science cabinet was that we stimulated some research projects on chestnut silviculture. How do you establish this tree back in the woods?

Now the thing that’s amazed me is that we found out that the chestnut works wonderfully well in totally un-remediated mine spoils. Now you may have heard that from others, but the whole idea that you could take these piles of rubble that come from surface mining and that instead of smoothing them out like they used to do and end up with something that was so hard that only grass would grow on in, they put chestnuts in just these piles of rubble, and the chestnut takes off and grows five, six, seven feet tall the first year. It’s an immensely fast growing tree. It’s a wonderful tree. It is both a pioneer species and climax species. Those are technical forestry
terms. Like a good lawyer I’ve learned just enough about other peoples’ business just to be
dangerous, which the lawyers have to do.

So, it’s a tree that if it’s in an open area will branch at a low level and bloom early in its career.
If it’s in a canopied level where there are already tall trees it won’t bloom at all but will just keep
going up straight, straight, straight until it pops out of the canopy and then it will begin to bloom
and bear nuts. And I’ve seen that at the West Salem stand where the chestnuts were multiplying.

So, all of those things have been extremely rewarding and wonderful for me to see in the years
that I’ve spend working on the foundation. Amongst the things--and this is the last thing I will
talk about. But amongst the things that I’m most proud of is that I have, and it was a big battle
on this I won’t go into all the details, but I have worked to convince people that the chestnut
foundation’s mission is the work of at least a century or more and that we have to gird ourselves
for that marathon. We have to see that it’s going to take a hundred years or more to A. get the
trees B. check them out and C. get them spread out over the natural range so that the trees
themselves can begin to infiltrate back into their natural range. Now, that’s the bad news. The
good news is that there is no tree better adapted to getting into disturbed sites than the American
chestnut, and what is the eastern forest of the United States but one big disturbed forestry site?
So, long after I’m pushing up daisies or feeding some oak tree, and the plot I have in a small
cemetery in Iowa near where my parents are buried, the American chestnut will I not only hope
but I believe will be spreading back into its natural range.

BB: So, how did you get to interested in trees and get all involved in this tree business?

DW: Well as I said, I was originally chairman of the mayor’s commission on city’s tax
revenues, and I saw that there was no more--in Minneapolis and the Twin cities. The Twin cities
is all one--there’s Minneapolis and St. Paul and there’s three rings of suburbs, but it’s really just
one big city. You can’t tell from one end to sixty miles the other way, or seventy miles the other
way where one city ends and another begins. I saw that the trees were the most important
element of the city’s infrastructure and the most pervasive element of it. In my capacity as
chairman of the national urban forest council, I used to go around giving keynote addresses at
conferences all over the country. One common speech that I gave was called “Beatification be
"damned" that we should be planting trees even if they were ugly and smelled bad. Fortunately they're not.

Another thing that I saw very early on in the ‘80s, I was briefed on global warming--global heating we shouldn’t call it warming. That sounds too nice, and the disaster that it looked likely to produce. I used to talk to people like that, and they looked at me as if I was wearing a pointy tin hat, like I was out of my blankety blank gourd. But I’d seen what the scientists were saying in the ‘80s, and it scared the heck out of me. And I knew that the chestnut was an extremely fast growing tree and might be very well important in this whole process. I went to the chief of forest service research in Washington when I was down there and president of American forests. A guy by the name of Dr. Jerry Sesco, not Sisco who worked for--but S-E-S-C-O. And he just laughed at me when I told him what we were doing. He said, “Oh, the chestnut’s gone. It can’t come back.” This was the chief researcher of the United States forest service. And I walked out of his office practically in tears. I talked to Scott Wallinger who was the senior vice president of West Vacor, which has now been merged away for timber lands. The biggest possessor of land in the eastern United States either by direct ownership or by lease. And said, “Scott, come up with a quarter a million bucks a year to fund this chestnut research.” Back when a quarter of a million was bigger than our whole budged, and we’ll call them the West Vacor or even the Scott Wallinger chestnuts. He laughed at me. He said, “What we want is orders of magnitude increase in our fiber production in our eastern lands.”

And I said, “Scott, how are you going to get that?”

He said--he kind of hummed and hawed, and I said, “Well, don’t tell me if it’s a trade secret.”

And he says, “No, eucalypts.”

I said, “Are you out of your mind?”

I said, “That’s the one species”-- yeah, I said, “Have you learned nothing about your fights with environmentalist?” That’s the one things that will drive them completely up the wall, and here I am with a silver platter holding before you the tree that would make any environmentalist in the country hug you or do something even better. And he says, “No.”
And I said, “Well, at least send your scientists down.” So they sent their scientists down to Meadow View, this was in ’93 or ’94, and they said, “Oh, yeah these guys are doing something.” But they didn’t respond. So, to U.S. Forest service didn’t respond to the American chestnut, the big timber companies didn’t, and I also addressed the nurseryman. I gave the keynote address at the American Association of the nurseryman’s annual convention. I talked to a bunch of the top nurserymen about the country. I said, “Look, guys. Put together a three or four thousand dollar fund, and you’ll have these wonderful trees.”

“Na.” So like the little red hen in the children’s story, the American Chestnut Foundation did it itself. Well, now guess who’s sniffling around us like you know what? The forest service, the big timber companies. Oh, I also talked to the Wirehouser people when I was president of American Forest. They gave me the same answer. Well, they’re all sniffling around us like crazy now. Even the nurserymen, and like the little red hen we did it ourselves.

BB: And so, what motivated y’all to do it, or why did you all believe in it?

DW: Well, because I believe in what Winston Churchill said, “What be the use of living if it now to leave the world a better place for having been in it.” You know? Otherwise, we might as well go out and commit suicide and get the hell out of here. I really believe in the parable of the stewards in the twenty fifth chapter in the gospel of Matthew. Where it’s not enough, the one steward got five talents of silver and turned them into ten when his master was gone. Another got two talents and turned them into four, and the third steward wrapped his in a napkin and buried it in the garden. And to the first Christ said, “Well done thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of thy lord.” But to the third one who merely preserved what he had. He didn’t lose it but didn’t make it more, didn’t make it better. He said, “for you to be cast out into udder darkness where there is weeping and nashing of teeth.” If we are stewards of the planet, we have an obligation to increase to what is there and to pass it on improved, not degraded. And lord only knows we’ve been degrading it enough.

BB: That’s great.

DW: Anything else?

BB: Anything else you want to say?
DW: No, I mean I’m a lawyer I could talk forever. That’s what I do for a living, and you can see I’ve done great amounts of public speaking across the country about trees.

BB: Yeah.

DW: It was Thomas Jefferson who said that there is no greater service-- I can’t give you the exact quote. My sister did it in needlepoint for me, and it’s on the wall of my office beautifully embroidered with trees. But, Thomas Jefferson said that there’s no greater service that a person can render to his or her country--I think he said “his country”--than to provide a useful plant to its culture. Well, how about providing back the most useful tree. The tree that built America.

BB: It doesn’t get better than that.

DW: It doesn’t get better than that. Well, I’m glad you’re doing this. Good luck.

BB: Thank you.