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# Chestnut Memories

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## Oral History Transcript

**Bethany BAXTER**

Interviewer: Bethany Baxter

Interviewee: Lee Sexton

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Transcriber: Bethany Baxter

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BB: I'm going to press record. So, first thing could you just tell me who you are, where you live, how old you are?

LS: My name is Lee Sexton, and I was borned and raised here on Line Fork. At Ulvah, Kentucky, U-L-V-A-H, but they've moved that post office now in to Perry County, and its Cornettsville, Kentucky now. And I live on the old farm here that I was born and raised on, and that's my old home down there that I was born in. And I'm 80 year old, I was 80 this past March, and I've been playing banjo 73 years, and I've still got the same banjo that I learned to play on, and ... fretless, wooden screwed and it had a groundhog on it. I gave a dollar for it. And getting back to these chestnut trees now, whenever I was growing up, young boy, there were all kinds of chestnut trees here, big trees, Oh Lord, that was a sight on this earth to see what trees they was. And they voted this stock law in here, and people used to turn there cattle, and the hogs, sheep, and everything, out in the Mountains you know, and they voted this stock law in and everybody had to fence, had to build a fence around their farm. They tended their corn and stuff right there back in the Mountains. My grandfather, he lived right across the creek here. I guess he had 25 or 30 hogs, and he'd fatten those hogs, they'd get fat on chestnuts, and acorns. Whenever he wanted one to kill, he'd just step up there to the barn, and start calling his hogs, and they'd come out of the Mountain, a whole gang of them, and he'd pick out the one he wanted to slaughter and he'd kill it, right there, shoot it down. And they started blighting out, dying you know. And they as I said while ago, I went to school down here, and this huge big chestnut tree, it was a sight to look at, it was plumb full of these big old chestnut burrs. Now they don't fall until they season out, get brown looking. And a lot of time when they fall, and whenever they hit the ground, they bust open and the chestnuts fall out. Now we had to walk backwards and forwards to school, went barefooted, and we would race to that chestnut tree, and if one got more chestnuts than the other one, then they'd take those burrs, take them right to the side of the head with them or anything. We wore knee britches, hit them on the legs, and it'd bring the blood. And then in the winter time, well, other words, where people had to fence, they'd cut these big chestnuts, and they'd saw the logs into 10 to 12 feet, and they'd split, just like an acorn, and they'd build an old time rail fence, a log fence you know. They didn't set posts and nail it up, you know. And they made liquor, moonshine, back in here in the heads of these hollers. People would start stealing their rails, getting their rails to run that liquor off with. Boy, they liked to have war over that. There's a graveyard right up the creek about half a mile from here, and they had church up there one Sunday. And there's an old preacher by the name of fire eating Jim Caudill. He'd come to church and he'd have on overalls, like I have on, barefooted, his britches legs rolled up just below his knees, and his ankles and legs would be just as rusty, he never washed, and on the top of his head, he didn't have no hair, and you could see the dirt right in the top of his head, but boy he could preach. And he was making prayer up there and there's three big chestnut trees, one of them up there, and one of then big burrs fell out of that big chestnut trees and whacked him on the head. The blood just spun out of the top of his head. And he never let up, he just kept making prayer and whipping that blood, buddy. So I begged my mother to let me spend the night with my first cousin at, where you turn up 1103 there. And my Uncle run a liquor store, there used to be a liquor store there. Well she let me stay all night with them. And

they lived over in Ulvah, right across that bridge over there. And him and his wife got up and went to the liquor store real early and me and my cousin, were supposed to went to school. And they had the best squirrel dog that ever was, and me and Laine, that was my cousin, we decided to go squirrel hunting. And we stole Uncle E's shotgun out, and went right in the head of a big holler, and that dog treed a squirrel up a big dead chestnut. And after the chestnuts died, on the body part of them there'd be fuzz looked like that thick on them. Just like gunpowder, you could stick a match to them, they'd catch a fire. And we were wondering how we were going to get that squirrel out of there, and there was a little maple tree growed way up, and I climbed that maple tree up into the forks of that chestnut. And I run it out of a hole, and well, Laine shot it and set that a fire on me, stuck a match to that chestnut and me way up in there. I had to jump out of there, liked to have killed me. Never did think I'd get to the house. And then in the wintertime there were good to make kindling out of. Of course they weren't no good for a fire to make heat, it'd burn up too quick. And me and my Dad go right to the top of that hill right there, big snow, knee deep, and cut down a slim chestnut, oh it'd be a pretty good size, and we'd trim it up right slick and turn it loose down that mountain. Buddy it'd go down through there just like a black snake, and come clean to the creek. Here, and sometimes, the ends of them, they'd be coming so fast the they'd hit the creek the ends of them we'd have to saw them off they'd stick up in the bottom of the creek. And then we'd saw it up, get a mule, haul it to the house and make kindling out of it. Of course, to cook with too, but it wasn't much fire wood, it'd burn up too quick. And then people started cutting these that weren't hollow, most of these were hollow. And I guess there's some of the lumber around somewhere today. You couldn't get a piece of lumber out of a chestnut tree that didn't have wormholes in it. And they'd make dulcimers out of them, and make furniture you know, with them wormholes in them, prettiest stuff that ever was. And then, I don't know where a cow would eat a chestnut or not, I never knowed of it. But now that's what they fattened their hogs, they'd just turn them out and they ate chestnuts, acorns, beechnuts. Old big hogs that weigh 350 pounds, stayed mud and fat, all the time. But now, as I was saying while ago, I know where some chestnut trees is that they bear every year now, old big burrs, just like they did back in the mountains. But now he planted them chestnuts and got a start of them, years and years ago. The old man's gone now, him and his wife both, but they bear every year, now he had to get them chestnuts somewhere.

BB: Are they Chinese?

LS: I don't know. The just ... exactly ... he's give me I don't know how many. They taste and look just like the old wild chestnuts. But now you can go in the Mountains now, you can't find a dead ... they've rotted up, fell and rotted up. But lord I've went in the mountains before now and hunted, I've hunted a lot, and it'd come a storm or something and I'd get out of them chestnut trees just as fast as I could. Because the wind blow them down. But now her brother knows where one is at over on Cumberland River, that's just across the Mountain from Appalshop. You know where Pine Mountain is, across Pine Mountain over on Cumberland River over there. It bears, its out in the Mountains. He said it was as big

around as his thigh there. And it bears chestnut every year. But after them being gone so long and then coming back, I can't figure that out. Can you?

BB: No, well, I know that some people are trying... there's an organization that's trying to make a chestnut that's blight resistant, so its got a little bit of the Chinese chestnut which are resistant, but most of its American. So they're trying to breed that up, but they haven't released it back in the wild, so I don't know what that is that you've seen.

LS: They were the prettiest thing that ever was, when they bloomed back when I was...

BB: What did they look like?

LS: Huh?

BB: What did they look like?

LS: They just had a big old taggy looking bloom on them, and whenever they'd shed that bloom they'd be a burr start just about that big around, and it'd just keep getting bigger, I've seen burrs that big on them, had 5 and 6 chestnuts in them. Lord, I've eat them, and old people now used to go back in the top of these hills and these fields and things and plant potatoes, and if they had to work all day they'd take a bucket with them, 8 pound lard bucket, gather them up a bucket of chestnuts, and you can get a drink of water anywhere out in these hills, any little old drain or anything, just take your hand and rake it out, and water come in it, best water you ever drunk, and they'd get water to boil them chestnuts, carried them a little salt with them, and that's what they'd eat for dinner.

BB: Did they ever eat them any other way besides boiling them?

LS: Huh?

BB: Did they ever eat them any other way?

LS: Yeah, they would roast them, yeah bring them in and...I've seen them put them on top of a cook stove and roast them, you know, and they had these old time fire grates, burnt coal, and they had what they called a poking stick, that they'd lift them dead ashes out and them hot ashes come down and, and they'd throw a handful over that grate. They'd pop open just like popcorn. They wouldn't form a kernel like popcorn, but they would just roast and bust open, yeah, they were good now. But them that this feller raised down here, I couldn't tell no difference between them and these wild ones used to be here.

BB: Yeah people say that the Chinese chestnuts, they don't get as big, and the nuts aren't as sweet, so maybe it is an American, I don't know.

LS: But now, this one I was talking about my brother in law had found, he said it was a wild chestnut. Yeah, but, I'd say that up here in this Lilley Cornett Woods up here there's some.

BB: I heard there was one up there.

LS: yeah, cause that's a virgin piece of timber in there you know. And University of Kentucky owns that.

BB: yeah, I'm going to talk to Robert Watts at some point.

LS: Rob Watts?

BB: Yeah

LS: Yeah, his wife died the other day.

BB: Oh no.

LS: yeah, cancer got her. Me and Rob's wife's Mother is first cousins.

BB: Oh no.

LS: yeah, I don't know, I hated it for him, she was a nice lady, she surely was.

BB: I just called him the other day, and I don't know. He said he wasn't working this weekend.

LS: Yeah, I reckon he stays right by himself as far as I know, up there.

BB: How long ago did his wife die?

LS: I'd say she's been dead about a month hasn't she?

BB: Did you ever hear about anybody talk about cooking up chestnut for any sort of medicinal... for medicine?

LS: I never did hear of them using that. But did you ever hear of talk of catnip?

BB: Uh-huh, yeah.

LS: Opal's got a big patch of it, set it out right there and I put the miracle grow to it and it's that high.

BB: whoa.

LS: yeah. And there's some fellers tell me the other day that you could cut the tops of that catnip out and dry it and its worse than marijuana. Make you drunk. Of course, I never did... I've drunk enough liquor to float that car out there, beer and stuff, but I never did take no drugs, no marijuana, pills, or nothing like that. But I guess that back whenever I drunk so much, if I'd have known what it was I'd eat it I guess. (laughs)

BB: well Lee, do you ever remember stepping on a chestnut burr or anything like that?

LS: oh god yeah, yeah man, yeah. Barefooted, we just got one pair of shoes, that was for the wintertime. Yeah Man, they'd stick in you buddy. And you'd throw one hit somebody with it

and it'd bring the blood every time, buddy. Someone got after you with a big chestnut burr, buddy, you'd take off.

BB: Did you ever build anything out of chestnut?

LS: No, no.

BB: you cut some down?

LS: yeah, I've cut them down for wood, yeah, me and my Daddy. And, just like I said, we'd turn them loose off of that Mountain. It'd be plumb top of that hill on that steep mountain there. And you know these hills is high here. Buddy, whenever you'd start them out in this snow, and all you'd see is just a glimpse of them. They'd go clean out of here into this creek here. Scoot them out, you didn't have to tip them. Just like a black snake, buddy they'd be gone.

BB: did people prefer chestnut over other kinds of wood?

LS: well, I don't know about back then, but I'd say now, I'd say now if people could get a hold of some chestnut wood they'd pay good money for it. But I don't know, I've seen some furniture made out of chestnut, had wormholes in it, and boy they had the price for it too. They say it's the costliest wood that you can get, is that wormy chestnut.

BB: I think all the chestnut got wormy after the blight. Once the wood's dead, that's when those worms would get in it. So if you see that wormy chestnut, that means that tree was killed by the blight.

LS: Yeah but it was hard to find a chestnut back here that weren't hollow, you know, they'd be hollow. But they still growed and had chestnuts. But, I'd say that is somebody could find one now that was solid, wasn't hollow, it's untelling how much money it'd bring.

BB: Do you think there were more chestnut trees than other kinds, was it the dominant tree, or just..?

LS: No, there's weren't no more, in places there were more chestnuts than there were others. But Oak, and Poplar is the most wanted logs right now, trees you know. But there's some... and walnut now, now that walnut, man it's high.

BB: You know how there's all these old time saying, about 'dull as a fro' or

LS: what now?

BB: you know, all these old time saying that people have. My grandmother uses them, like 'dull as a fro' or 'no bigger than a handful of minutes'?

LS: oh yeah.

BB: did you ever hear one that talked about chestnuts?

LS: no, no.

BB: what about, were there any songs you've learned, or anything like that about chestnuts?

LS: no, no

BB: like there's that fiddle tune Chinkapin Hunting.

LS: Just, all the things I know about them is ... I've eat them and I've seen them a growing, and chop them down, and he set that one afire on me down there and I had to bail out of it, well its just like pouring gas on something. There's a fuzz, I call it fuzz formed on that tree from the roots right up, where it was so old I guess. And, he stuck a match to that down on the bottom and it come up that tree just like you'd poured gas on it. Had to bail out of it.

BB: Do you remember when the blight – What did people say about, when they saw the trees start to die, what did people say or how did they feel?

LS: whenever they died? They couldn't figure it out, you'd hear everybody a talking, wondering what killed them or how come them to die out you know. And I never did hear nobody say what caused them to die. But now they went and whenever they went they went fast, buddy, just one after another one you know.

BB: were people scared, was it scary because they depended on them?

LS: I never did hear nobody say. But now they would build log houses out of chestnut, get them not too big around you know. But I don't know of narry one around here no where that's standing now. I don't know whether they've burnt up or just rotted down or what, you know. But now the inside of the chestnut, a log here, would rot before any, the outside would. And every squirrel, I've been a squirrel hunter and a rabbit hunter all my life, and every squirrel you'd get after, it'd run a mile to get up in a chestnut tree. One of these holes in it you know, where it could hide. Yeah, it was a site to see, those dead chestnut, big huge chestnut. Most of them growed right on the top of the Mountain. And down, there's a few down in big swags you know. But now this one I was talking about it growed right beside of the creek down there. Boy, it was a big one. And it stood there for years and years and years after it died. And I reckoned a storm must have blowed it down or something.

BB: did you ever hear about anybody, they used to use chestnut to tan leather, had a lot of tannin in it, did you ever hear anything like that?

LS: no, I never did. That's something, I've heard people talk about tanning it, but I've never did fool with anything like that. But now this first banjo I got had a groundhog hide on it, and they left the tail on it. Before the old tail finally come off of it, people give me interviews and they'd ask me why I left that tail on it. And I told them to wipe the sweat with. (Laughs). I bet you its over 100 year old.

BB: wow, and that's the first one you owned?

LS: yeah. I've got a fiddle in there that's made 17 and 13. That's an old one too. And a boy gave it to me, he played music with us and he got sick, and he couldn't carry his instrument, and we begged him to go to the doctor and be checked out and he went to the doctor and he was eat up with cancer. And just before he died he was down on his death bed, he lived at Clayhole, Kentucky, that's just outside, this side, of Jackson, and he had his mother to call me and I went down there, and I thought the world of him and he gave me that fiddle. That's been 35 year ago. I'd say, I don't know now, I ain't been all over Lilley Cornett Wood but I'd say there are some chestnut trees in there. I'd say there are.

BB: Did anybody ever gather up chestnuts and trade then at a store for coffee or sugar?

LS: no, no. But I guess it's happened back before my time. My dad got his hands blowed off dynamite, fooling with dynamite, let a stick of dynamite and a box of caps go off in his hands, blowed both of them slick off. Left them sticking right to the ceiling of the house. And I went in the coal mines whenever I was 16 years old, worked and I had to, I had to go to work, and my Uncle took me and I was underage but he took me in and worked me. And I worked 5 days a week in the mines and play music on the weekends, these square dances and things.

BB: Would ever people bring chestnuts for lunch?

LS: Yeah, back old timers whenever they used to. I never did see them now, do that, but I've heard my granddad talk about it. And they'd get them a bucket of chestnut, and get water and boil them and eat them. Take them some salt with them and eat them for dinner, keep from walking out of that mountain to the house you know. To get something to eat. Why right in that....You can see in that hill right there I've hoed corn many a day. There's saw logs in there right now.

BB: I've been wondering if you fattened a hog on chestnut would it taste different than a hog fattened on corn?

LS: yeah.

BB: How would it taste different.

LS: Yeah, in other words it was just as good or better. They called it mast back here, mast you know. They'd go to the top of the hills and you'd be a hunting, you'd see whole gangs of them hogs now. They'd take their feet and get them chestnuts out of them burrs now. They didn't try to bite them out because them things are stiff and strong whenever they seasoned out. Why man, I've seen them old big burrs that big buddy. But most time, whenever they'd fall, get ripe and fall now they'd bust open, that burr would, but not every time you know.

BB: would you have to beat the hogs to the chestnuts? Would they eat them all up if they got there before you did?

LS: yeah, yeah they'd eat them. Then in the wintertime they'd raise corn and stuff. Why, they would sleep, them hogs would stay right back in them mountains and under cliffs and



things. But these old timers, my grandpa would call his hogs to go to the barn, buddy they'd come out of them mountains a flying, he'd feed them corn, and just as soon as they eat right back in the mountains they'd go. And they got learnt to that, and about feed time every evening they'd come out themselves. But in the summertime you'd never see one. They'd stay right where they could get plenty of mast and stuff to eat, they'd stay right in the hills them hogs would. And there's bunch of wild hogs here, and my mother'd sent me to school and I'd run into a bunch of these old timers going a wild hog hunting. They'd have three or four old dogs tied up, with plow lines, big long ropes, and I'd go hog hunting with them. They'd head right to these chestnut trees at the top of the hill and that's where you'd find them. I've seen their teeth sticking out this far right side of there.... And the dogs would run one down, run him til he got tired and he'd be fighting them dogs. And them old timers would walk up and they'd use an old caliber called 25. And shot a shell about that long. They'd take him right between the eyes and kill it, drag it out 2 or 3 of them would right down the mountain and get it to the creek and they'd come to the house to get their mule and a sled, and they would load him up in that sled, haul him to the house.

BB: So when the chestnuts got blighted and there weren't anymore chestnut trees were there no more wild hogs?

LS: After they put that stock law in here everything just went... they had, people had to sell their cattle, milk cows and everything.

BB: when was that stock law put in?

LS: I don't know now but it's been years and years ago. And they let their cattle run out too now. Well everything run out, horses, and hogs, and everything. Until they voted that old stock law in and then people had to go to work. They didn't have the money to buy wire, they went to the mountains and cut these chestnuts and oak trees, split them and made rails out of them. Made fences. And then people burning them chestnut rails, they called them fences, the way they laid them up a 'fence lock' you know. And they'd be getting them some rails to burn and that fence would fall and whenever it started falling it'd far it'd be out to that car, boy, that made people so mad they nearly died!

BB: well do you think if we brought the chestnuts back to the forest, do you think people would like that?

LS: what now?

BB: Do you think that people would like to see the chestnuts back?

LS: Oh yeah, yeah. I'd give anything, yeah, to get to see them come back, yeah. The biggest thing that is now, they've got them old deer in here, they turned them old beaver loose in here, and they've got elk in here, and they've got bobcats and bear in here. Now there's bear over on Cumberland River, where her brothers lives, they see bear there every day. That's next to that Little Shepard Trail you know, up there. Now, whenever they get in my garden, them deer, I've got something sitting right over there that gets them out right quick. I don't

kill them, but I set them a fire buddy, and they don't come back, until another bunch comes in. They'll destroy a garden over night. I had a big green patch down there last year and before I knowed it they destroyed it, did just like they run a lawn mower over it. Somebody called the game warden on me and he come down here and asked me if anybody had been shooting around here, and I said 'yeah, I have'. He said he got a call that somebody'd been shooting deer around here, I said 'I have'. I said I ain't been killing them but I'd been setting them a fire. And he said I had a right to protect my property, and turned around and walked off. Now I didn't kill any but I just burnt them up, you know, to get them out of my garden.

BB: yeah. How would people use the chestnuts if they were growing back in the wild. Do you think people would feed them to their hogs again?

LS: now?

BB: yeah.

LS: There ain't a hog on this creek as I know of right now, and I doubt if there's many people who would even go feed a hog if they had it.

BB: Do you think people would eat them themselves?

LS: yeah, yeah.

BB: Do you think people would use them for lumber?

LS: yeah, yeah. but, I'll never.... We won't never live to see them, I don't think, come back again. But now they might, in the near future, come back. According to that one her brother found, but, someone might have set it out, or dropped a seed or something. After them been dead that many year, I don't hardly see how they could come back. Of course, now, the good Lord can make anything grow.

BB: I think that about does it. Well, do you ever hear anybody talk about chestnut anymore?

LS: Never hear it named no more, no. No, you never hear nobody talk about one. And I've been out in the woods now, back where chestnuts used to grow, and I'd look and see if I could see one standing, and you couldn't even see one a laying, they've rotted up now, been too many year.

BB: Just, say that there were chestnuts today that came back, and you could see them and they were bearing nuts, how would you use them?

LS: How would I eat them? I guess I'd boil me a few, or roast me a few.

BB: Did you ever hear them cooked any other way, than just roasted or boiled?

LS: no, no.

BB: Do you think that when the chestnut was gone it changed the way people could live around here?

LS: I never did hear nobody talk about none, or just around, you know, everybody just knew they were here you know. And I've hoed corn for people for 50 cents a day, and right at the top of the hill there'd be some of the prettiest land that ever was, and they'd clear it up and tend it corn, but they didn't cut them chestnuts, but they died. And there was a still standing there, about 6 or 7 of them. Of course they were dead, you know. And there was an old boy by the name of Gladis Caudill I hoed corn with, and he carried a sling shot around his neck all the time, and he'd get after a lizard, it'd take up that chestnut tree and it'd nearly go to the top, and he'd cut it in two every shot with a slingshot. Man, he's the best sling shot I've ever seen.

BB: that's might be about it. You got any more chestnut stories Lee?

LS: no, I guess that's about it now.

BB: well, I guess that's it. Thank you so much.

LS: yeah.

BB: You've got some good stories Lee, you've got good stories about everything. All kinds of stories.