

Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Interview Date:

Interviewer: Bethany Baxter

Interviewee: Ella Preston

Interview Location: Little Cowan, Letcher County, Kentucky

Transcriber: Iliza Myers

Audio File:

BB: Okay, so they've got it recording. So, the first thing I have to do is just give you a statement about what we're doing so you know. And so, it's just a formal thing I have to do. The key objective of this interview is to serve as a research tool to document memories of the American chestnut in the southern Appalachian region. Information obtained in these interviews will be retained and made available to the public for further use in efforts to promote a better understanding of the role of the American chestnut in Appalachian culture. So then--let me turn this up a little bit. So, I have to ask you, did you sign the participant identification and release agreements?

EP: Yes, I did.

BB: Okay, great. So, that's all the formal stuff we have to do. I kind of like to start--will you just tell me your name, when you were born, and where you live--where you are from.

EP: Well, my name is Ella Preston, and I was born November 26, 1916, and I will be ninety-two years old in December. And I've lived all my life on **Cam, Little Cam**, except when I was away in school.

BB: Um, well, did you have anything you wanted to go ahead and say that you--I saw you had those notes there.

EP: No, I made some notes about what I could remember about how the chestnut might have effected my life or how I came in contact with any type of these native chestnuts.

BB: Do you want go ahead and say some of that, or do you want me to start asking questions?

EP: Well, it might not be what you want. You could turn that off and let me talk--

BB: I've got as much room as--I'm not worried about room, and it sounds great.

EP: Let me start out, and then you can delete it if you don't want it.

BB: Okay.

EP: My first encounter ever remembering is when I was about five years old. We came to-- we lived first on up about a mile and a half up **Little Cam**. We came to our new home up here above me, and my mother and I walked. And we were tired, and it was hot. When we got down there, there was what people used to call a stake and rider fence around the edge of the yard of our new home, and I called it a rail fence. And we climbed on top of that to rest until the wagon got there with their furniture, which was one load hauled all they owned. They'd been married about five or six years, and you could see a fence across the branch that someone else had built that was made of what we called palings. They were slats of wood about two inches wide, four feet long, and instead of being nailed to a rail, they had two wires at the top about eight inches from the top, and two from the bottom about two inches from the bottom. And rails crossed between every slat, and they went up in the bushes out of our sight. But that was a novelty to me; I never saw it done before or since. But that's to be in my story later.

And then I, of course, got busy with school work. Uh, first thing I knew the barn was built up there. That was a priority with older folks. They had to take care of their animals, and my dad always kept one or two horses. And they had a milk cow and probably some younger cattle to house before it got too cold, so when I came back from school one day, there was the barn ready to put a roof on. And he had hired an old man that lived just above us to help him make the boards to put on the cover on the barn. So, they set up their deal to fix the boards, and they used what they called a mallet, which is very much the shape of a judge's mallet today only it was real large and heavy, made out of heavy wood, one end larger than the other. And they would hit the back of a single-bitted axe. And chestnut splits real easy. They can just about split it perfectly. **A good man that rives, is a word they used [meaning] to make boards, could make so many in a day,** and they would lay them on that barn roof where they put their boards across for it to nail to. They'd lay the planks side by side, and then they'd put one on top of the crack. And it wouldn't leak. So, they soon got it covered, and it's stayed covered there till I was a teenager, with those boards.

And all that time I had a dream like I wanted a sled. I had no brothers or sisters, and I played with things like that just like a boy. And Dad chased me away from his scraps and

wouldn't let me use them, but when I got older, I sneaked out two pieces of 2x4. And I went to this fence that had been put together with wire and sneaked out enough to cover my sled, and on the hill I went. And I rode day and night for several days until I got tired or my sled wore out, one. But I got rid of my dream, so all this time I was just a whirr of the dead trees I could see up on the hill, and I found out they were chestnuts.

They were no standing above the other trees, not a limb on them. Just no leaves either. And there they stood until Dad would either cut them for posts, or they would fall down. But one had a few chestnuts I found laying under it, so I picked up a handful, all I could find, and ran to the house to show my mother. And she cooked them for me.

And let me tell you right now, you must beware of native chestnut burrs, or the modern ones either. They've all got the needles that'll get in your hands, and they're hard to get rid of. But the native chestnuts all have three chestnuts in the burrs, and when it comes a real hard frost, if they're still on a tree, they'll open and those chestnuts will fall out. And then, in two or three days the burr falls, or the whole chestnut will fall with them on the inside. But you'll always find three, or if only two is formed you'll find where another one had started. You could tell that there was three.

And one exciting, cold, frosty morning when I was about thirteen, I heard my uncle John and a man above us called George were taking a bunch of us girls to Bad Branch to pick up native chestnuts, and that was a rarity. We were going to camp, spend the night, and pick chestnuts up and bring them back the next day. So, we gathered up all who where going, all girls, and these two men that were much older than us, and George took a horse. And we called him when we got up there, and his daughter came—she was my best friend at that time. And George's wife came out. He said, "Deena, you must be sure you make your dad some gravy. He can't go if you don't make him gravy for breakfast." So, she promised him faithfully she'd make the gravy, and we took her home-cured bacon, and potatoes, and other foods of what we would eat all day.

And the next morning, away we went. We had to walk across Pine Mountain, and we followed the path. We didn't follow the old-time wagon road, but we turned up a branch about a mile above us, and up the mountain we went. We were quite a rowdy bunch going;

we were fresh and all of us young except these two older men, and we picked up chestnuts as we went. When we got over across Pine Mountain on the other side to a branch they called Bad Branch, which is called that until this day.

By then it was getting late, so we looked for a place to camp. And George had lived in that area when he was first married, so he could pretty well tell us where to go. And we found a nice, big cliff, built us a bond fire, and broiled our meat, and had a hilarious supper. Of course by dark, we were ready to go to bed, and we fixed us a bed. These two men were pretty good singers, and they started singing old time songs. And they made that valley *ring* they sang so loud, and they sang us all to sleep. And we laid down spoon-fashion, put the quilts over us, and when we woke up, they were laughing. You could have heard them half a mile. They were hilarious. What had happened during the night, one of the girls had passed some gas where she had eaten some raw chestnuts. (laughs) Of course we all looked at each other; we was afraid, Is it us? Is it us? And next day, they selected one of their group and said that was the one that did that, which we always wondered, Was it me? Was it me?

And then, George got his gravy, and we ate breakfast and started picking up chestnuts in earnest next morning. George knew just where to take us, and he found all the chestnuts. And I really worked and picked up.

When the day was getting pretty late, we had to start home, because we had nearly five miles **to get us to walk**. And I had so many chestnuts, I couldn't carry them. So, George was sorry for me, and he put them on that horse and carried them home. And next day, my father had to go up to George's home and get my chestnuts, so he brought them home and my mother put them in the closet up next to the chimney where it was good and warm.

And time passed, I was in school, and they were busy with the farm work. My mother would say, "I saw some little white worms crawling around. Wonder where they come from?" So, I didn't know. Every day for about a week, she would mention something about seeing the worms. Finally, it dawned on her what had happened, and those chestnuts had exploded in the--millions, seemed like, worms (laughs) had all the eggs hatched in them where it was warm. And they hadn't done anything to stop it, so that ended my chestnut--

my native chestnut hunt. They had to throw all my chestnuts away, and that ended--by then they were all dead, so--the trees everywhere. So that ends my camping. (laughs)

BB: Wow, that's a great story, though! Gosh! It sounds so amazing. I can't imagine doing that today. That sounds so incredible. That would be something to remember. How many girls went with you?

EP: I think there was eight or ten--

BB: Wow, that's a whole crew!

EP: --and they're all about our age, my age.

BB: So wonderful--

EP: They were all here on the creek, and most of them were kinfolks.

BB: Aw, that's so nice. Gosh, that is too bad they all--

EP: But now, even these Horse chestnuts or Chinese that we have now, if you don't do something to them when you pick them up, those worms in them will hatch those eggs. But you can boil them, and you can't find the eggs. What I do with my Horse chestnuts if I pick them up, I put them in my freezer, and I don't take them out until I get ready to use them.

BB: So, how did your mom used to cook chestnuts? Any special way?

EP: Unh-uh.

BB: You just--

EP: She just would put them in water and boil them about, I guess, fifteen, twenty minutes. Elsie wants to tell you about some of that. She's found some stuff. She told me this morning.

BB: Good. I'll have to go--

EP: So, you must stop and see her.

BB: I will, sure.

Did you just eat them by themselves, or did you cook them with other things?

EP: Unh-uh, just plain chestnuts. We'd have to use a knife to split them. Some people would bite them, but I never would. I would always use some kind of a knife to open them. But I never cared for many. I never would eat more than three or four at a time. It's just I loved the taste. They were mealy, and the native chestnuts was sweet and not as large as these we have today. And mealy when you'd cook them; they were really good.

BB: I've tasted some, but there weren't Americans. They were--yeah, I've heard that the American ones were really good. Um, did anybody ever sell or trade chestnuts around here?

EP: Unh-uh.

BB: No? Yeah, most people--

EP: After I married, my husband brought these, I call them Chinese or Horse chestnuts, I reckon they're the same. I've got some trees here now that burr every year. And when they started to burr about--oh, I guess, thirty years or so ago, I'd pick them up, just a few. They didn't have many on them then, and I'd can them and I was so happy, "Oh, we've got these big chestnuts! Those *big* ones!" They are large, much larger than the native. Now I leave them for the ground squirrels, and the gray squirrels.

BB: Yeah, they love them.

EP: Not many on them this year. I've got a tree out here on the side of the hill, but those burrs are a problem to get rid of every year. And there's a tree of Dad's that hangs over the front gate of the walk, and those burrs fall right in the road and the yard. And (laughs) it's a problem. Even the--that's these Horse chestnuts now, that kind; we never had a native one growing in our yard.

BB: Um, well, do you remember your dad telling you about feeding chestnuts to any kind of livestock?

EP: Uh, hogs will eat them. I don't know if I ever remember cattle eating them. We never had hogs that ran out. After I'd put them in my--these ol' chestnuts we have now in my freezer, I'd take them out, and my dog loved them. I'd feed them to my dog sometimes. That's all the animal I ever really knew eating them.

BB: Okay. I've never heard of dogs eating chestnuts.

EP: He loved them, and I've got some Hazelnuts that he loved.

BB: That sounds good. Okay, so you kind of talked a little about this already, but I wanted to ask a more, kind of [something], I guess. So, how did you gather the chestnuts? How did you get them out of those holes if you had to get them out of the holes. What did you store them in? And how did you--I guess you kind of said you freeze them now, but how would you have--where were they in your mom's kitchen when you would--?

EP: Well, she put there in that little wardrobe is where she stored them where it was warm. But, when they fall, usually the burrs open on the tree and they fall as they come down. You don't--if you ever touch that burr, you get those needles in your fingers. You stay away from that. You'll just pick the chestnuts up. They're on the ground. Now and then you'll find a burr open with the chestnuts in it and you can take your foot, if you've got shoes on, and step on them, and they'll come out. After it frosts, they're easy. But you can't get them out now if the burr is closed. I wouldn't attempt it.

BB: Did ya'll ever try to dry the chestnuts out? I heard some people talking about trying to dry them.

EP: Unh-uh. Never did.

BB: Um, let's see. So, do you remember--you kind of spoke a little bit to this already too, but were there parts of your parents' house or fencing or barns that were made out of chestnut?

EP: Oh, yes. I forgot about my barn. The logs that were put in that barn are up there until this day, and it turns out, they were made by my grandfather and were a part of his home a mile up this creek where he lived. And those logs are older than my mother. She was

borned in that house after they moved there, and she was born 1891. And the house was there and those logs, and twice since we've taken over, since they passed away, someone has approached me to buy those logs. And the first one offered me eighty dollars for the logs. They are still sound except where they're laying on the ground. The ones that are in the **earth**, look as perfect as the day they were put there. And it was only last week that my renter up here said some man ask him to talk to me could he buy them. And they had been there that long. At least eighty-five years since I've been here. And my grandfather--there's his axe marks where he made them, on the logs.

BB: That's so neat. So, you're not going to give them up?

EP: No, I'm not going to give them up.

BB: Good for you. (both laugh)

EP: I don't care about antiques especially, but **nothing good about them**. (laughs) I'm going to keep them.

BB: You should. That's sounds like--that's amazing. Were there any tools or items around the house like furniture that you remember being made out of chestnut?

EP: Unh-uh. No, we never had chestnut furniture that I know of.

BB: Did you yourself cut down any chestnut trees or do any making these split rail fences or do any of that carpentry kind of stuff?

EP: Unh-uh.

BB: Okay.

EP: But my dad liked them for fence poles, because they would last. If there was any scraps, they would split for kindling real easy. But not many ever ended up in a fire. They stood up until they fell on the ground. And I can remember seeing them without any limbs, just a straight trunk.

BB: Because they had died, or that's just how they grew?

EP: It was some kind of a blight, I imagine, that killed them or virus or something.

BB: So, do you think chestnut was a more desirable wood than other kinds of wood? Or a more desirable tree?

EP: It was, at that time, it was, I guess, easy to work. It was easy to split and you would see a half safer house with the board roof. And they made those rail fences, which were highly prized.

BB: Were there any games that you would play with chestnuts or songs? Anything like that?

EP: Unh-uh.

BB: Were there any traditions or times of the year when you would always eat chestnuts, or any kind of gatherings?

EP: You had to gather them after frost in the fall when they fell.

BB: So was that sort of like a tradition for ya'll to go and gather them together?

EP: No, that was a one time that we only went the once.

BB: Um, let's see. I love my grandmother, because she has all these little sayings like she'll say, "dull as a froe" or "no bigger than a handful of minutes." You know those kind of old sayings--you know what I'm talking about those kind of old sayings?

EP: Um-hm.

BB: Were there any of those that mentioned chestnut at all? Or anything like that?

EP: Unh-uh.

BB: Okay. I'm dying to come up with one. Nobody has--I haven't found any yet, but I really want to. I kind of want to talk a little about the blight now. Do you remember--you said you do sort of do remember seeing those trees dead along the hill. Do you remember what anybody said about it or how people were feeling about it? Anything?

EP: Nothing. Only my father was glad to have them available when he needed a post or something to use in his buildings. A rafter if one was small, but they were all pretty little. A telephone pole or something that size.

BB: So, when people realized that the chestnuts were gone, and they would no longer be available for folks to eat or feed to their livestock and stuff like that. Was that really scary, or was it not that big of a deal?

EP: Unh-uh, not that big of a deal back then. They gradually died down, I think.

BB: Do you remember how old you were when the blight came through here?

EP: Huh?

BB: Do you remember how old you would have been when you remembered seeing those dead chestnut trees?

EP: Oh, I just grew up with them--they were dead the first time I can remember. At least eighty-five years plus that I can remember seeing them. And they had chestnut burrs on the ground still there that hadn't rotten under some of them. No chestnuts.

BB: Were there any actions taken for people to try to stop the trees from dying?

EP: Unh-uh, no. Nobody knew anything about it. They didn't even spray their fruit trees or anything back then. Not that I know of. Not around here.

BB: Um, let's see. Do you remember ever seeing the hillside full of blooming chestnuts? Is that like an image that you have in your mind?

EP: Now, my chestnuts I have now bloom every year. There's plenty of old bloom out there on my shop building behind the house where it's fallen.

BB: Do you remember when you planted those Chinese chestnuts?

EP: I don't remember the exact day. My husband, one time, planted them all around here, but they are dying too, some of them. But I think the trees are crowding them partly.

There's some up here across the branch from the barn. There's one that burrs quite a bit,

and there's some trees standing there dead. I'd say they've been there, oh, fifty years some of them. That one of Dad's I'm pretty sure it's been there fifty years.

BB: Why do you think your husband wanted to plant those Chinese chestnut trees?

EP: My husband is just interested in raising chestnuts. He wanted blueberries, and chestnuts, and raspberries, and hazelnuts, and everything that way. He was a teacher too—an industrial arts teacher.

BB: What does that mean, industrial arts?

EP: He taught woodwork and stuff that way.

BB: Oh, cool.

EP: At Whitesford high school.

BB: I took a--I did one of those dulcimer making classes with Charlie Whittaker at the music school around here. That's the most woodworking I've ever done.

EP: The dulcimer?

BB: Yeah.

EP: I know a man that makes them, or did, I don't know whether he's able now or not or will profit. One of our neighbors down on the creek makes them.

BB: Oh, neat. Yeah, they're beautiful instruments.

EP: He makes good ones, too. They're professional.

BB: Well, do you think that the loss of the chestnut had any kind of direct economic impact on your family at all once they were gone, or not really?

EP: Well, to begin with, he made my furniture, most of it in here. He made that cabinet for a gun cabinet. He didn't want to display his guns--

BB: Is that chestnut?

EP: --and I used it for whatnot. He made the light on the TV. He made that school. He made this table. And this is a different kind of wood now. It's not just the same wood and that varnished different color.

BB: Did your husband ever say much about chestnut? Did he like working with chestnut?

EP: He couldn't get it that time. He made these book cases out of rough poplar, and he planed them down to make them smooth. And he made them.

BB: Those are really beautiful.

EP: He made my shelves in the kitchen.

BB: That's so neat. Those are beautiful.

EP: My stuff upstairs, a lot of it. So, I'd say it had a great deal to do with their lifestyle. I could get rid of it now, but I don't want to since he made it.

BB: Yeah, I wouldn't give--those are beautiful too. Gosh! That's such a neat--

EP: I love books, and I have to have some place to store them. I've got so many upstairs, you can't hardly get through. (laughs)

BB: Well now, I have a couple questions about restoration. Are you aware of the fact that they're trying to restore the chestnut tree—the American chestnut tree?

EP: I'm aware that they're trying to experiment and get the old-time chestnut back to grow, yes. And I hope they can.

BB: That's right, yeah.

EP: It won't never help me at my age, but it'll help future generations. My son won't never live here. He lives in Florence, but he's never coming back. And I don't have just very close relatives around.

BB: Why do you think it's important to restore the tree?

EP: Well, for one thing, I don't like to lose a native tree of any kind whether it's a chestnut or a dogwood or an old-time, what we call serviceberries. They have their place in all of our lives, and especially animals loves to eat the chestnuts. And in the mountains gray squirrels is something they hunt, and if a gray squirrel eats chestnuts, or hazelnuts, or beech nuts, their flesh is much sweeter than one that just lives on whatever they find—hickory nuts or anything.

BB: That's interesting, I've never heard--a lot of people have said hogs fattened on chestnuts taste better than hogs fattened on corn or whatever.

EP: They do. Any kind of an animal.

BB: But I can never get an answer about why they tasted better. You're saying--

EP: It's something in the chestnut, but now, those native ones are much sweeter than these we have now. It's quite a bit of difference. I've eaten both of them.

BB: Um, how do you think people around here that live around here today, do you think they would use the tree in the same way that you used it back--?

EP: Unh-uh.

BB: How do you think people would use it today?

EP: Well, taking this creek, of course we're mostly older people and the young ones don't do much woodwork, I don't think they'd use them. They're just looking for the money makers like oak and hardwoods.

BB: Do you think that they're going to be successful in restoring the chestnut tree?

EP: Yes, I believe they will.

BB: So, you're right in saying that--they're trying to restore the chestnut tree, but it's going to take maybe a hundred years before it's really back in the forest. So, they're going to need help from people in the community and people on this creek and people on kingdom come creek to try to plant the trees and take care of them while they're young so that they can get

the chance to grow up and be a part of the canopy again. Do you think people will want to help with that?

EP: You will find one now and then will. They'd have to be mostly educated and educated for that. But just the average illiterate(?) citizen we have, all they're looking for is a white card and the next meal (laughs), some of them. You can ask the children in school, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to grow up and get that white card just like my daddy." That's an answer I've gotten.

BB: (unintelligible) --around here for sure. Do you think that it's important to record stories about how the chestnut was used back in the old times?

EP: It would be interesting for future generations to read about it. (laughs)

BB: Do you think it would help anybody get excited about chestnut and want to see it come back once if they heard some of these—

EP: Yes I do. Now and then you run across somebody it would.

BB: Well, would you have any advice for the people who are trying to bring that tree back? Is there any concerns you see or advice?

EP: Well, I don't know if I'd have any advice that would help, but I hope something I can say will help because it was a valuable tree its day and time.

BB: Okay, great. That's all the questions I really have. Is there any other things that you can think of that you would want to mention? Anything we didn't cover?

EP: You've pretty well picked my brains. (both laugh)

BB: Good, that's what I like to hear.