

CHESTNUT MEMORIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

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Interviewee: Elsie Boggs

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Transcriber: Bethany Baxter

Audio File: ElsieBoggs.WAV

BB: So the first thing I have to do is give you this statement, it's all this technical stuff. Ok so, 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 attained in these interviews will be retained and made available for future use in efforts to promote a better understanding of the role of American chestnut in Appalachian culture. Then I have to say have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

EB: yes.

BB: now we're ready to start. Will you just tell me your name, when you were born, and where you grew up?

EB: are you ready? Ok, my name is Elsie Boggs, I was raised near Whitesburg, Kentucky on Little Cowan, I was born on Little Cowan, I've spent years here, I've spent most of my time, some time in Michigan, some time in Virginia, I've taught in Virginia, and I've spent some time in Pike County but my home is here.

BB: when were you born?

EB: I was born July the 29th, 1918, I am now 90 years old.

BB: that's great congratulations! Is there anything you can remember off the top of your head about chestnuts?

EB: well when I was small we had chestnut trees, we grew up on quite a number of acres of land, probably 15 acres. There were chestnut trees close by our house, of course we always gathered them as soon as they were ready to be gathered, mature enough. And we had more fun, well we would roast some in the fire place under the ashes, let the hot coals drop down on them, they tasted delicious. Then my mother would boil a big pot of them and keep them setting around for us, that we could eat any time.

BB: will you tell me a little bit more about your mother, who she was, and how she might have used chestnuts?

EB: my mother was a Collins, her father was William and her mother was Mary Roberts Collins, and will you repeat that question?

BB: well you said you remembered your mother using chestnut sometimes.

EB: well mostly I remember her roasting them for us, or boiling them for us, and then she had this recipe that she made her cough syrup, so many cups, so many cookers of chestnut leaves. You want the rest of it?

BB: did she ever use chestnut leaves in anything else, or the nuts?

EB: she never did use it in cooking, because back then we just grew everything and we didn't have those fancy recipes, so she didn't use it in cooking we more or less just ate them as snacks.

BB: well I've got a list of general questions here, and if anything jumps out at you just speak up, its not formal or anything. What did it look like when chestnuts were growing wild in the Mountains here?

EB: well, the trees hadn't been, there'd been no logging done and no lumbering, no trees had been removed and it was beautiful outside. There were a number of chestnut trees, I don't remember how many, I don't remember how many but we could gather from a number of trees that grew. And I was so disappointed when they started dying out.

BB: did anyone around here ever sell or trade chestnuts?

EB: that I don't remember, no. Most all the families had chestnut trees around, and back then they didn't have transportation much to deliver stuff like that, they probably could have sold them.

BB: yeah, in places further south where people lived near the railroads people remember selling them.

EB: out here we had no way of transporting them.

BB: yeah. So, you did use to eat chestnuts, how did they taste?

EB: oh they were delicious, but we've tried some of these imported trees, and they're not as good as the old fashioned.

BB: did you know anything about feeding chestnuts to the livestock?

EB: yes, hogs would eat them. Back then they would let their hogs run wild, their pigs, and they would eat the chestnuts under the trees there were so many trees they would fatten their pigs on chestnuts.

BB: how many hogs would your family have?

EB: ok, there were 9 of us, and usually we would have, each winter we would have 2 hogs and a beef and I guess that's it. And mother grew chickens, had all those chickens. There were 9 of us and my Dad taught school, he only made 25 dollars a month when I was little, can you imagine? So we had to depend entirely on what we grew. Mother would can probably about 100 ½ gallon cans of everything that could be canned. Beans, apples, corn, whatever she grew.

BB: did you ever can chestnuts?

EB: never. The only thing we ever did was eat them roasted. Now the one thing about the chestnuts this day and time, they get the worms in them that back when I was growing up I

don't remember the worms that would be in the chestnuts like they are today. If you don't get the chestnut early you don't eat them. That doesn't sound too delicious does it?

BB: how did you harvest the chestnuts and how did you store them?

EB: well we didn't store any, we just ate them as they were in season. We didn't try to do anything with them other than at the time they came in.

BB: was there any part of your house growing up or barn, fences, that would have been made out of chestnut?

EB: no we had no chestnut at all.

BB: what about any tools, furniture?

EB: no.

BB: ok. Do you remember anybody ever cutting down a chestnut tree?

EB: not the old ones, I don't remember. Of course they just died, I don't know what they did with them when they died, I don't remember because I was real young.

BB: was chestnut a more or less desirable kind of lumber or wood?

EB: that I don't know.

BB: yeah, it seems like the men who were out there cutting them down remember that more than women tend to. Do you think the chestnut was an important symbol of this region or was important to the culture?

EB: Oh it hurt everybody when it finally died, it was quite a disaster, losing the trees.

BB: is there anything you can remember that would point to that, do you remember anybody ever talking about that?

EB: well the only thing I remember, I was rather young at the time, just what mother and dad had told me, and Aunts and Uncles who were much older than I, so I don't remember too much about them.

BB: were there any old songs that you remember that talked about chestnut?

EB: no.

BB: were there any games you'd play with chestnuts?

EB: we just ate them.

BB: do you remember ever getting together with people to go gather them, was there any tradition around gathering the chestnuts?

EB: no, we'd just get them as a family.

BB: what did you collect them in?

EB: it would be hard for me to classify them.

BB: now I've got some questions about the blight. Do you remember how old you were when the blight came through this area?

EB: I'd really... what was that the late 20s and early 30s? I think it was the early 30s, I would have been 12, in 1930 I would have been 12. So I don't remember too much about them, because I wasn't, well, I know I remember seeing the dead trees after they started getting the blight.

BB: when you Dad and Mom, Aunts and Uncles would tell you about the chestnut blight, were they upset or sad?

EB: oh yeah, everybody was worried about the chestnut trees dying.

BB: why were they worried?

EB: well it was just a tradition, all those trees that we'd had and then see the dead trees standing there, that upset them too. And I don't know, at the age I was I don't remember too much.

BB: Did anyone ever do anything to stop the blight?

EB: that I don't remember.

BB: if you had to describe an emotion that people felt about losing the chestnut, how would you describe how people felt?

EB: it was a tragedy.

BB: was there anything that replaced the chestnut after it was gone, if you didn't snack on chestnuts what would you snack on, or what did you feed to the hogs?

EB: well corn then. Of course we had corn back then too, I don't know, I don't really remember too much about what they did, what they replaced it with. Nothing though, I don't suppose other than what they already had growing. Corn for the hogs, they already had that, so I don't remember anything, of course out here you know, being here so far from where you could buy stuff you had to grow your own hay for your cattle, your own corn for your hogs and beef. I told them the other day I'd love to have a good corn fed beef, they are so delicious.

BB: have you heard anything about how they're trying to bring the chestnut tree back?

EB: no.

BB: well there's a group of people who are trying to make a tree that's blight resistant so it was live back in the forest. Do you think that's an important thing to do?

EB: it would be but it doesn't sound like its feasible.

BB: do you think if it could be restored that would be a good thing?

EB: oh yes.

BB: why?

EB: well they made good shade trees, and they were beautiful, bushy and you know. Of course the way we've got the mining and everything going now it would be hard to restore the chestnut tree.

BB: what do you mean by that?

EB: well they've taken the hillsides. The gas companies, the coal companies. I don't know if they could ever restore the old chestnut tree or not.

[Neighbor interrupts]

BB: do you think people today would use the chestnut tree in the same way you used them when you were young?

EB: that I don't know. I just don't know. The way the trees that I see that they're taking out of here today, the middle of them is dark. So I don't know if chestnut trees will be any better for lumber than what we're using today, but I can see those trucks with the logs on them. They don't look good, they've got the dark spots on the inside. So I really don't know about that.

BB: do you have any other stories, from when you were out gathering chestnuts?

EB: no.

BB: or did you ever getting pricked by one of those chestnut burrs.

EB: oh yeah, those hurt. We were barefooted so we had to be careful where we walked.

BB: yeah, a lot of people remember getting stuck by those burrs.

EB: they really would stick. Well these trees we have now, I would be down in my sisters garden, and the burrs would be down and they go through my shoes. They hurt.

BB: you said you only ate them as a snack, but did you ever hear about people cooking chestnuts up in some certain way, or putting them in cakes or breads?

EB: no I never. The only way we ever ate them was when we were running around. We never had them on the table, we never had them as a meal, we just ate them for snacks.

BB: that's about all I've got. What's most interesting to me is about how your mom used to cook them up in that slave.

EB: oh, in that cough syrup. Anybody ever needs to make a - see, I wouldn't have given you that recipe but its scattered all over the country now, because that's a family recipe, but when she made that salve, and Appalshop put her recipes in and everything, everybody got a copy, ever they're in New York. There was a couple that came down from New York and spent all summers here and they interviewed her. And when Appalshop was making salve- I shouldn't be talking. When Appalshop, when they were making the picture doing the special on her making salve that couple was here, they snapped film while Appalshop was snapping. I didn't appreciate that. I don't know how they knew it was happening but they came. No invitation.

BB: so will you tell me a little bit more about your mom, how did she learn those recipes?

EB: they came down, passed down generation to generation, from my Dad's mother's family, she was a Blair. And mother, anybody that would get burned they'd make this salve, and now you can get a burn, I do now and I've got a little bit. About 2 years ago my nephew, my niece and I made some, and when I get a burn I'll put a little coating of that on it and I won't get a blister.

BB: can I get you to read me this recipe, a voice recording of it? Just tell me what this is and read it to me.

EB: This is cough syrup my mother made, and the recipe has been passed down from generation to generation, and she used this and I've made it myself.

One cup of Sage

½ Gallon Water

2 cups lemon juice

1-quart honey or brown sugar, I prefer the honey

1 gallon of chestnut leaves

1-gallon mullion leaves

½ pint of bourbon or moonshine

This recipe can be divided, you don't have to make that much at one time. Boil sage, chestnut, and mullion leaves. Mullion is a broad leaf fuzzy green plant that grows close to the ground, usually found in pastures. Boil sage, chestnut and mullion leaves in water until sap is boiled out. Strain, add lemon juice and honey or sugar. Boil again and add the liquor, the bourbon. Just add enough to taste, that keeps it from souring. The recipes of Aunt Etta Banks have been passed down for generations in her family. These recipes came from her daughter, Elsie Banks Boggs, who lives on Little Cowan Creek near Whitesburg, Kentucky.

BB: that's so great, that's so neat. I've been wanting to find someone who has-

EB: well I told Ella yesterday, I don't have anything to tell her, you know everything --

