

Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Interview date:

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Interviewer: Bethany Baxter

Interviewee: Marie Smith Washburn

Interview Location: Greasy Cove, Alabama

Transcriber: Bethany Baxter

Note: 2 audio files transcribed here- MarieSmithWashburn_1.WAV,
MarieSmithWashburn_2.WAV

MarieSmithWashburn_1.WAV

BB: Ok, so I just pressed record. So the other thing I have to do is read you this statement to let you know what we're doing, and about the project. 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 tree. Have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

MSW: Yes

BB: Ok, now we're legal. [cut in and out] its being a little bit fidgety. [cuts in and out] Sorry, technology. So, the first thing, will you just tell me your name, and where you grew up, and how old you are.

MSW: My name is Marie Washburn, and I grew up on Straight Mountain, and what else was it?

BB: How old are you?

MSW: I'm 92 year old.

BB: Great. Is there anything that comes to your mind just right off the bat about chestnuts that you remember? What do you remember about chestnuts?

MSW: Well, as far back as I can remember we always had chestnuts to eat. And when I got big enough to go up to the field up there where they were, daddy'd have us picking them up. He'd sack them up and always save us enough to have for Christmas. He'd try to hide them from us but we could find them. And he'd say now don't eat them all up, we've got to have some for Christmas. Back then you know, it was hard times. We didn't have much, well, we had black walnuts but we didn't have no pecans nor nothing like that. We just had chestnuts and chinkapins and they are so good.

BB: How would you eat those chesnuts?

MSW: Well, we'd boil them and roast them, and sometimes we'd just eat them raw and they was good.

[tape cuts in and out]

MarieSmithWashburn_2.WAV

BB: Ok, lets give it another go.

MSW: Ok.

BB: I remember Larry Brasher something about, you had a good story about Christmas time or something?

MSW: Yeah [laughs], yeah. My second sister, I had one older than her, but she was funny. She'd tear a hole in the sack and go grab out the chestnuts and feed it to us kids. And Daddy said, "uh-oh, the rats has been in the chestnuts." And she'd lie and say, "yeah, I know it was a 2 legged rat that's done it." And he'd just laugh and go on, he'd never punish us nor nothing for getting them. But he'd want us to save them you know. Some years they didn't mature as good as they did others, but we always had chestnuts.

And, there's a little neighbor boy, he wanted to go see the chestnut trees because he hadn't never seen any, they moved up from Birmingham, and we carried him up there one day, it was pretty like this only it was kindly chilly. And my twin sister climbed the tree, way up high. And he said "oh, come down out of that tree, if you was to fall," said, "I wouldn't never stop running until I get to Birmingham." [laughs] And he loved the chestnuts but he didn't want her to go up to shake the tree, you had to go up the tree sometimes to make the burrs fall so you could get them. And oh, they were so good.

BB: She was saying that you had a twin sister?

MSW: Yeah I had a twin sister.

BB: And you wouldn't climb the trees --?

MSW: No, I wouldn't climb a tree, but she would. She would never phase to try climbing a tree. I would try to climb, and I could get up so high, I couldn't get, I guess as high as that Christmas tree, and then I couldn't get down. I couldn't get down and they'd have to help me down out of the tree. So I didn't climb much, but she did. She'd take her book and climb up in the tree and sit and read and I couldn't get up there. Well, mama'd always call on me to help her, because Mabel would always have that book under her arm. If she had to go do anything. Oh, we had a time.

BB: Did you grow up here on Gallant?

MSW: No, you can see this Mountain right over here. As you come down if you looked, you look, and you can see the rocks on the Mountain. Well, those rocks, where those rocks were

belonged to my Daddy, that's where my Granddaddy settled from South Carolina. He was 14 years old when he moved here and he lived to be 82.

BB: Wow. That's great. Was it mostly farmers around here?

MSW: Yeah, just farmers. Well, my granddaddy, he come and he entered so much land and he give all of his kids 40 acres a piece. Back then they just entered it you know, and you had to clean it up and build a house. It was hard times. But, Beauty got to live to see my Daddy, but I can't remember my granddaddy Smith because he died before I was big enough to know anything about it.

BB: Do you remember your parents ever telling you anything about the chestnut tree, or mentioning you about it?

MSW: Oh yeah, Daddy worried about it because you know it got the blight. And it was just gone, over like one year, it didn't take them long to just be gone. And the sprouts, you know the sprouts would come up but he never would cut none of them down, and he just wanted to take care of them. But they all died out and we didn't have none. But they just grewed out in the woods wild you know, and when he cleared the land he found them and he never would cut none down. We never did know what happened to them because they just died out.

BB: Were there any other kinds of trees he wouldn't cut if he was clearing land?

MSW: Well, he tried to save all the pines, because they made lumber you know. And he built us a house after I was nine year old. And its still standing, it still belongs to me. [laughs] Got a couple who lives in it and they don't do much for it.

BB: Well, I'm curious too about how the chestnuts were used. So I have some questions about the nuts and the wood. So if there's anything that you remember about this let me know. So did anybody ever sell or trade chestnuts at a store or anything like that?

MSW: I don't remember Daddy ever selling none but they might have before I come into the world. We never did want to sell them. we'd give them to the neighbors that didn't have any.

BB: You just gathered them for yourself?

MSW: Yeah, just gathered them for ourselves.

BB: So you said you remembered eating chestnuts. I'm curious how, what were the ways you would eat them.

MSW: We'd just boil them, or roast them, or eat them raw. We never did use them in cooking nor nothing.

BB: Why was it important to have chestnuts around Christmas time?

MSW: Well, we always wanted nuts, you know, for Christmas, and that's the only way we could have any. But we had walnut trees but we always had walnuts if we wanted to bake a cake or something like that, I never knowed mama to cook them no way, only just boil them for us.

BB: Did you ever feed chestnuts to any livestock?

MSW: I can't remember it if we did.

BB: Some people talk about feeding them to hogs.

MSW: well I guess they could if they'd had—but we never did have enough but what 6 kids could eat. [laughs] By the time you fed 6 kids, and mommy and daddy, well made 8 you know, it took a pretty big bunch. Because we liked them and just went around eating them.

BB: So was it something you'd eat as part of a meal, or would it be more of a snack?

MSW: It's more of a snack. We didn't ever have them on the table to eat, we just eat them between meals and when we wanted something to eat we'd get chestnuts.

BB: So how would you get the nuts out of the tree?

MSW: Well, they were in burrs, and they'd open up, sort of like a pecan, it's in a hull and it opens up, and it will fall out. Well, that's the way the chestnuts done. But if the burrs fell off and didn't open up, we'd get us 2 rocks and beat them open and get the chestnuts out. But if you ever got one in your finger or in your foot you was into it. That hurt.

BB: So someone would shake them out of the tree?

MSW: Yeah, that's what my twin sister was doing. She's going up to shake them because they had so many fell out, and she's get up there and step on the limb and shake it. It scared me, I never did like for her to climb but she'd climb anyway.

BB: were there any other animals in the forest that you'd have to beat to get to the chestnuts?

MSW: no, I don't remember nothing ever getting them because they were so sticky they couldn't put their mouths on them, that would hurt, they weren't going to get hurt I don't guess.

BB: How did you store the nuts once you'd gather them? What did you put them in, or where did you put them?

MSW: Back them we got flour in a little flour sack, well we put them in them and daddy would tie them up. That's where he hid them that one time from us. Mama had a quilt stacks and she had quilts stacked over against the wall, and he stuck them chestnuts up in that quilt stack, thinking that we wouldn't find them. [laughs] We found them all right. And then my sister, she's punch a hole in it, I guess she got the scissors and cut a hole in it because she could get them out pretty good, rake them out in her hand and then divide them out to us.

BB: How many bags would you have?

MSW: I can't remember how many bags but I know he hid that bag, that just stood out to me, because he said, "hey, the rats have got in our chestnuts." I know we had plenty of them, but that time it just stuck with me because he had said that.

BB: Would, I guess you would gather them in the fall?

MSW: Oh yeah, before the frost come. Well, it might have frosted on some of them to make them come open. We'd just gather them in the fall and save them.

BB: And how long would they last you?

MSW: Oh it would last a pretty good while if we didn't eat too many of them. We had to be saving with them. We boiled them by the pot-full, you know the big old black cooking pot. Mama would set them on the stove, just take the eye off and set it down where they'd be next to the fire. And boil a pot full and then if she didn't have a fire in the stove she'd rake out coals and let them boil on the hearth there in the fire place. She kept us some boiled.

[phone rings] Judy where'd you go?

BB: As far as the wood goes, do you remember anybody ever using the wood for anything?

MSW: No I never did know of nobody cutting none down to burn. They were too precious. And didn't everybody have them, because I can't remember them being, we had them in the field, and

I can't remember how many there was around that had them, because they were just in the field when daddy cleared it up.

BB: Were there any tools or any furniture in your house that would have been made out of chestnut?

MSW: No, but I've heard tell of furniture being made out of chestnut. So people that had them might have cut them down to build something out of it.

BB: I guess I already know the answer to this, but have you ever cut down a chestnut tree to use for anything?

MSW: No.

BB: Have you ever heard of anybody using chestnut to tan leather?

MSW: Well, I might have heard Daddy talk something about it because he tanned leather a lot you know. For his mules and his horses and things that he'd have to have leather for.

BB: Nothing jumps out at you?

MSW: No, I can't remember, that's been a long time ago. [laughs]

BB: Well, did people ever take chestnuts to school with them?

MSW: Yeah, we did. We carried them to school. We had to walk about a mile or 2 to get to school because we didn't have no school busses nor nothing.

BB: Were there any chestnut trees on your way to school that you would pass?

MSW: No.

BB: Do you remember ever being pricked by any of those chestnut burrs?

MSW: Oh yeah. Many a time you'd get them in your finger and it would hurt. They'd have to hold you down to pick them out. Kids couldn't stand to be pricked.

BB: Were there any games you would play with chestnuts?

MSW: No, I don't remember playing no games with them.

BB: Were there any songs or sayings that people had that had to do with chestnuts.

MSW: Well, I can't remember it. I guess there was. Of course, there's saying about everything nearly, but I can't remember it.

BB: I love those old saying, I think they're so fun. Were there any that you liked particularly, not about chestnuts but just --?

MSW: We went to Brianna's gymnastic meet up at Huntsville Saturday a week ago. And, I just, when I got out of the car, someone was blowing a horn, and I said 'blow it, you can't suck it' and my granddaughter liked to have peed in her pants. I said that and I bet that will be recorded. You can mark that out. She had never heard that, she said Nanny, where'd you hear that, and I said well I've heard that all my life. After the cars got to coming, see when I was first growing up we didn't have no cars. Just buggies and wagons and people rode horses. They didn't know what a car was.

BB: When is your birthday? When were you born?

MSW: I was born September the 7th, 19 and 16.

BB: Wow.

MSW: Yeah, I thank the lord that I've lived this long.

BB: Yeah, you've seen a lot of change.

MSW: Yeah, I sure have.

BB: Were there any holiday celebrations that you would do that involved chestnuts?

MSW: I can't remember. They just come in in the fall like the walnuts and pecans does. And I can't remember but I'm sure we had them every time in the fall.

BB: What about when you would go gather chestnuts would you just go with your family, or would you go with your friends too?

MSW: Well, mostly we would just go with the family, but that day we went with that little boy. I can't remember going with no more kids, because mama said they were dangerous on account of the burrs, we'd stick them in them some way and hurt them.

BB: What do you remember about when the blight came through?

MSW: It just killed the trees. And we just worried because, oh we won't have no more chestnuts you know. And Daddy said "well, I can't help it, because the blights in them. It's not my work, it's just what god did, put them here for a while and then they're gone."

BB: How old were you?

MSW: Well, I lived there on the farm until I was 29, then I got married. I said, "well, I've lived a Washburn longer than I've been a Smith."

BB: How old were you when the blight came through?

MSW: Well I guess I was somewhere from 7,8, 9 on like that.

BB: How quickly, how long did it take for the trees to die?

MSW: It didn't take long. I remember the bark just sliding off of the trees. And Daddy went and cut them down because he knew they weren't going to put back. And he had to cut them down, drag them out of the field.

BB: What did he do with them when he cut them down?

MSW: I think he just drug them out side of the field. I don't reckon he could do anything with them after that. The bark had slipped off of them and he just had to get them out of the field so they could plow.

BB: So you said on y'all's 40-acre farm, how many chestnut trees were on that property?

MSW: Well, it was on the upper 40 was where the trees was, the other 40 didn't have no trees on them.

BB: How many trees were on that upper 40?

MSW: Probably about 6 or 7, I guess. And then we had 2 chinkapin trees and that's all the trees there were.

BB: Did the chestnuts mostly grow up on the ridges around here, or down in the bottomland?

MSW: It was up on the mountain, up on the high part. They wasn't down in the -- but see, one 40 was up this was towards the top of the mountain and we lived down, its a flat place.

BB: Do you remember anything else that your Dad said, or did anyone try to do anything to stop the blight?

MSW: I don't know, I can't remember. But I don't guess he knowed what to do. When they took the blight they were just gone.

BB: Do you remember hearing anybody talk about it, or reading anything in the paper?

MSW: No, well I reckon I was too little to read back then, you know, to understand the paper. But I never did hear nothing about it. Daddy talked about it but he didn't know what caused it nor nothing.

BB: Was your dad emotional about it at all?

MSW: Yeah, he worried about it, because he loved them as good as we did.

BB: was there anything that replaced the chestnut after it was gone, did you go hunt other nuts more?

MSW: yeah, we'd go hunt hickory nuts out of the scaly bark hickory nuts, they was good. You could go out in the woods and get. But we just had to go back to our black walnuts and I never did care for them. Seemed like they were too greasy or something. I never have cared much for black walnuts.

BB: How did the chestnuts taste, what did they taste like?

MSW: They just had a different taste from anything I ever eat. Oh I just hated it so bad. When my friend had that chestnut tree, and I thought oh I'm in luck now, I'll get me some chestnuts. But I couldn't eat them. I couldn't eat nothing that had a worm in them.

BB: I don't blame you for that. So do you think that the loss of the chestnut tree had any direct economic effect on your family?

MSW: I don't know if it did or not, but I know we worried about it. People that was around there and knowed that they were up there in the field, they'd talk to Daddy about it, but there wasn't nothing he could do about it.

BB: Do you think that the chestnut tree was kind of like a symbol of that kind of farming lifestyle, that when it disappeared things changed?

MSW: Yeah, I guess it did.

BB: Are there any other stories you remember about growing up or when you would go hunt those chestnuts, or anything like that.

MSW: No, I never did know of none when we would go out in the woods. I don't remember ever seeing any more beside them that was in that field.

BB: So not everyone who lived around had chestnut trees?

MSW: No.

BB: Did the chinkapins die out when the chestnuts died out too

MSW: Yeah, they went out too, and we never had no more.

BB: How were the chinkapins different from the chestnuts?

MSW: Well, they're little bitty, round, just little bitty round ones, and the chestnuts was big. They were good too, but there wasn't as much to eat out of them as there was out of the chestnut, they were bigger.

BB: Did y'all, did you ever have split rail fences around here?

MSW: Yeah we did, Daddy used to split rails and build fences.

BB: Do you know if he'd ever spilt rails out of chestnut?

MSW: No, he didn't.

BB: What did he use?

MSW: He used hickory and oak, and made his fence. When I was little we had a rail fence, but after I was bigger he got barb wire to make the fence out of.

BB: Do you know anything about how they're trying to restore the chestnut tree?

MSW: No, I don't know nothing about it.

BB: Well, they're trying to bring it back, I guess I was telling Judy earlier, they're trying to breed it with those Chinese chestnuts a little to get some of the resistance from that tree, so they have a tree that's almost American, not completely, but almost all American, and it will have nuts like an

American, and look like an American, but it will have some of these genes from the Chinese tree. So do you think that's a good idea to try to bring the tree back?

MSW: Yeah, I'd like to have it back.

BB: Why would you like to have it back?

MSW: Because they were good and I enjoyed eating them and, since they've got the Chinese chestnuts, looks like there could be a way to bring those back. I hope they are anyway.

BB: Do people who live around here, do you think they know anything about chestnuts anymore?

MSW: Well, I don't know if they had any growing down here or not. Cause, I've just lived up on the mountain, I never lived down here until after my husband died and I moved down here with my daughter.

BB: How do you think people could use the chestnut tree today if it came back?

MSW: I guess they could make furniture out of it. I've heard of the chestnut furniture, but I don't know where, there was more than there was just around where I lived or not. I guess they had to be to make furniture out of it.

BB: Have you ever heard of anybody cooking chestnuts up in any food, or anything like that, or you just ate them raw?

MSW: No, we just ate them raw and roasted them boiled.

BB: Did you add any spices to it?

MSW: We added salt when we boiled them, but that's all.

BB: On Christmas, what would it be like on Christmas when you'd eat those chestnuts, what would you be doing?

MSW: I don't remember what we'd be doing. Daddy just always liked to have them, I don't know if he was used to them when he was living in South Carolina or not, I never did think to ask him.

BB: why did he move here to Alabama?

MSW: well, he had an Uncle who came first and then his Daddy came. He was 14 when they came here. They come in covered wagons from South Carolina. He said he had a yoke of dogs he had to watch after, a 14 year old. He told some funny stories.

BB: I bet. Did he hunt a lot?

MSW: No he didn't. Well, he'd go out possum hunting at night but he never did eat no possum, but he sold them, you could sell them you know to people. I've seen them cooked but I couldn't eat one. Mama never did cook one.

BB: Do you think people around here, other people that live around here, would want to see the chestnut tree come back?

MSW: I think they would.

BB: Why do you think they'd want to see it come back?

MSW: Because it was good and it gave them nuts to eat.

BB: Do you think people could make any money off of the chestnut around here?

MSW: I don't know, they might could if they had enough to sell.

BB: Well that's all the questions I have really.

MSW: Well, that's good.

BB: Are there any other stories that jump out at you or things that you can remember?

MSW: No, I think I've told you about all I can remember

BB: Well thank you so much.

MSW: You're welcome.