

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA

Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

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Interviewer: Bethany Baxter

Interviewee: Alex Day

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Chattanooga, TN

Transcriber: Iliza Myers

BB: The first thing I'm going to do is I'm going to make this statement to you: The key objective of this interview is to serve as a research tool to document memories of the American chestnut, and 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 tree.

Have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

AD: Yes, I have.

BB: Okay, great. Now we're ready to roll. Do you want to just start by just telling me who you are, where you're from--biographical information.

AD: My name Alex Day, native Pennsylvanian. I'm a retired professional forester, graduate of Penn State University 1967, and I've traveled a lot since I graduated from Penn state. I spent two years in the United States Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic learning how to collect seeds and grow trees in that part of the world, followed by three years in the United States army in the United States and in Germany and saw some of the fabled or not so fabled trees in the black forest, in Germany's black forest, which I found at the time they didn't look so magnificent to me having come from parts of Pennsylvania that had remnants of our eastern hardwood forest--virgin remnants of our eastern hardwood forest.

So, that's my professional background. I spend thirty-seven years with the Pennsylvania department of conservation and natural resources bureau of forestry working alternately as a private land forester and then a public land forester doing everything from timber sale administration to recreation and the last seventeen years of my tenure with the PCNR bureau of forestry in Pennsylvania was nursery operations manager for the then two existing state forest nurseries that we had at that time. That's my professional background, and somewhere along the way I decided that I needed to know more about the revival of the chestnut. I'll put it that way.

The folks who started the chestnut chapter in Pennsylvania, I don't know where they got my name, but they came to me long before I was a member of the Pennsylvania chapter and asked me if I would speak at their annual meeting, and I said, "But I don't know anything about what you're doing or anything." And they said, Well, you can speak about anything as long as it has

to do with what you do or the forests of Pennsylvania private and public and federal, and I was their main person on their agenda for their fall meeting. I think it was in 2002.

I got over my fear of public speaking many, many years ago thanks to my Pennsylvania employer at PCNR. We had to pass a one week course in how to be a public speaker, so I sweated through that for a week, and after that it was like a breeze, and if I talk too much, you can just off this microphone. Anyway, that's what I did and ever since I spoke to the Pennsylvania chapter it was just a--it had just been an organization two years by that time, but it was growing by leaps and bounds. I decided, "Geeze, I should join this outfit." And so, I did and within three or four years the Pennsylvania chapter hosted the annual meeting of *The American Chestnut Foundation*. So, it was decided that the meeting should be held in the state college of Pennsylvania, which is the home of Penn State University, and with some of our contacts at Penn State University and forestry school and so forth we put on, I think, a grand show for all the members who came to the meeting from all over the country. And that just tickled my interest in things chestnut.

I knew of chestnut from the time I was a preteen. I was twelve or thirteen years old. My dad was a high school teacher. He was a biology teacher. He told me a little about what the chestnut was, but it really didn't ring a bell until one day we had a coal furnace in the house I lived in in central Pennsylvania and coal was expensive, and my dad said, "You know, I'm going to get a load of old limb wood here from the arbors company that's pruning the lines, trimming the lines for the power company around us for the county, and I'm going to have them drop that wood the limbs and trunks and wood in our back yard and I'm going to get you and your brother a two man cross cut saw and you guys can cut it up in pieces that will fit in the furnace." We thought, Oh, this should be kind of neat.

So, now I learned how to pull a cross cut saw. You didn't push it, you pulled it only. We soon made firewood billets of all that wood probably about two or three cords, and the sad part was that it only lasted about two weeks in the furnace, maybe three weeks. It didn't last as long as coal did at all. Coal at that time was expensive. It was about sixty dollars a ton, and that was probably like a two weeks' wage at that time. This was during the early fifties. So, how did I get from there to the chestnuts? Well, my dad said, "You guys better find some more wood around here that's dead."

So we went roaming across the neighbor's land and our land looking for dead trees with the two man cross cut in hand, and we spied this dead pole, and we thought it was kind of funny looking. Anyway it was an old telephone pole. Had no wires on it, but it had a couple of insulators on the top, and we said, "Geeze, it's dead, no limbs. Let's cut it down." So, with not too much trouble we cut it down without making a notch. We cut it most of the way through and just pushed it over, and it fell down nicely. And we started to buck it up in short pieces that would fit in the furnace, and my dad had given us an old double bladed axe, which is not an ideal tool for splitting wood. It's just for cutting wood, but my older brother said, "We'll just take a piece of this and stick it on the stump of the pole still in the ground see if we can split it to make it easier to take home that way."

So, I grabbed the axe and I wound up and gave that chunk of wood a whack with a big old dull, but very effective double blade axe, and it literally split right in two. I thought, "Ain't that like a musical note to it like a 'Boink!' " And that was easy, so I'd get another half and I'd make quarters of each billet, and the rest is history. We took it home and that didn't last very long either, but I noticed when it burned that this was untreated wood mind you--it was not treated with creosote; it was full of tannic acid I since learned with my forestry studies that chestnut had a lot of tannic acid, and it was retained in the wood even after the tree died and that prevented it from rotting.

So, I've never forgotten about chestnut and just wondered where it'd gotten to and so forth, and that developed into a history pursuit of the history of the chestnut, and my mother was an amateur historian to boot. She was always telling me about the old pioneers this and that, and later on I met some old first generation foresters in Pennsylvania who were graduates of what's now known as Penn State school of forestry resources at Penn State at the Monalto campus. Monalto is a little village in southern Pennsylvania, which was the start of the forest school movement in Pennsylvania beginning in the early part of the twentieth century in nineteen hundred and one. The graduates of that school, it would later become an academy, went to work on what is now called the state forests of Pennsylvania, and they were trained to go work there. All of them didn't work on the state forest land, just the ones that had the highest grades in the classes did.

I met one of those graduates later on. He was a long time district forester, and he graduated in a class in 1908 from the academy, and the first class graduated in 1906. And this gentleman's name was Forest Dutliner. He was a native of Columbia County Pennsylvania, and he had gone through three years in the academy and they went--students in those years when year-round, so a three year stint in an academy was equivalent to a four-year school today, and he immediately left school. He spent three or four months in the Pittsburg area doing a study of the water shed of the Allegany River, and then he got a telegram from the Harrisburg office and they said, Go to Renovo, Pennsylvania.

Geographically, Renovo is half way between Philadelphia and Erie, Pennsylvania, and it's got its name from the Pennsylvania railroad. They needed a name for this little town they were making--it was a railroad town. And it was where the steam engines of the Pennsylvania railroad stopped to get re-watered and greased. Renovo means renewed.

So, it was there, and Dutliner was told to go to Renovo. You couldn't go to Renovo in those days by road. You could go by foot path. So, he went by the train, and he told me when he got on the train as they were getting close to Renovo that the conductor said, "You know young man, you're the only person getting off at Renovo, and we don't stop this train for one person." That was a common way of doing business in the steam train days. It just took too much energy to start a steam train as opposed to a diesel electric engine, so the conductor said to Dutliner--he was a young guy he said, "I'm going to get you ready to get off this train. We're going to slow the train down by the station, and when I tap you on the shoulder you throw your bags out and I'm going to tap you again," he says, "you jump and you just roll and you should be okay. Don't try to get up until you stop rolling." So, Dutliner told me he said, "Call me Dut, by the way. Mr. Dutliner sounds like I'm old." At the time he was eighty-five. He said, "I jumped. I through my bags out, and then I jumped, and I rolled." He said, "It worked! I didn't even break my glasses."

I interviewed Dutliner many years later after he got to Renovo, but I went to his house for an interview. The first thing he asked me was, "What are they doing about the chestnuts?" And I thought, Holy smokes! My dad said the same thing to me when I got out of forestry school, and here's Dutliner eighty-six years old asking me the same question. And unfortunately, I could not give him an answer. I said, "Dut, I don't know, but I'll certainly find out for you."

Then along came the cornerstone people in the Pennsylvania chapter Bob and Anne Lefel, and they asked me if I would talk to the Pennsylvania chapter in their annual meeting, I think that was 1992, and that just peaked my interest. So, here I am today relating some of my history, professional education, and my travels all relating in a very broad way, but all intertwined with, the way I look at things, the chestnut story. And I'm hoping in my lifetime--I'll be sixty-seven years old in about two weeks--that we will have gotten over the hump, so to speak, of getting these fabled chestnut trees back in production to the point where they are resistant to the blight and we can see the restoration of the species across this natural range. Hopefully, before I pass away.

BB: Yeah, you were sort of just hitting on that. My other question was what are your concerns or hopes or fears about where we are right now or in the future, but you sort of said those. Is there any thing else you wanted to add?

AD: Well, I have been thinking about the future just as you mentioned, and as a nursery man, a nursery person for seventeen years I was always impressed with the people who knew the most about growing, in this case, trees from seeds at the nursery were not the professionals. They were the ordinary people. Most of them had farming backgrounds ordinary folks who worked at the nursery part time and then they worked at a farm where they worked on their father's farm and they maybe worked at some store on the weekend. It just came natural to them to know how to plant a seed--any tree seed, practically any one--and have it grow, so they had very good expertise when it came to planting acorns to grow oak trees, and oaks and acorns are in the same family *Castanea*--I'm sorry *Fagaceae*. I got the wrong family name there.

So, when we had a trial planting at the nursery I worked in Pennsylvania, it was called Penn Nursery named in honor of William Penn. We didn't have a lot of--we had a lot of knowledge, so we planted the first batch of chestnuts there just as if we were planting acorns, and we knew that their very favorite food both species of food of not only chipmunks and squirrels and so forth, but also everything that flies, crawls, and walks. The nutrition in a chestnut or in a walnut and to an acorn is so high that animals fight over them to get them. So, we had a rule with the nursery that big seeded tree seeds like walnuts, butternuts, chestnuts, oak acorns red and white had to be planted to at least one hundred and fifty feet away from a tree line. The nursery was surrounded by a forest, and that was an arbitrary number we came up with that said most of those

ground rodents except for some other one some avian types will not come more than a hundred and fifty feet away from their refuge, from the forest to get even a chestnut or--even as good as it is, they could be preyed on by a hawk or an owl or something. Well, we found out with chestnuts that you'd better double that hundred and fifty feet and then you're not even going to be lucky. They are so sweet and so nutritious and so sought after. Most of these pests didn't even know what a chestnut was. These were chestnuts that we'd just grown in an orchard fifty miles away, but they could smell something good, and their source of smell is how they locate food, whether it's above ground, under ground.

And we thought that would happen, so we tried to put a screen on top of our planting, and professor Tim Steiner who's a member of the chapter--he's from Penn State. He and I did the first plan of the nursery. We said, Now what do we do here? So, we had these wooden frames that were four feet wide and eight feet long that we used to protect acorns when we plant them, so we put the same protective frames over them, and they had quarter inch hardware cloth on the frame and that protects the oak's seedlings, and we thought, Oh this should protect the chestnuts too so they squirrels and chipmunks can't come eat them.

And it worked okay, but then after awhile you have to turn the screens over and give the seedlings time to germinate and have time and have space to grow. So, we did. We turned them over, and there's about eight inches of height there to maybe about six inches. It's a two by six frame, and the seedlings grew, and they started pushing on the wire.

And we thought, Well, do we let the seedlings go through the wire or do we take off the screens? Well, the consensus was that we take the screens off. Wrong, wrong. We took those screens off late in the afternoon about 3:30 one day, and we closed the nursery--the nursery closed at four o'clock each day.

We came back the next morning at about 7:30 in the morning. Every dog gone nut was gone! These are germinated nuts, just had a good ol' immature seedling poking up, and we thought, Well lesson number one: Don't give those dog gone rodents a chance, because they're going to take it and take not only the seedling, they'll take the nut too. And we had been warned by Sarah Fitzsimmons, one, that this could happen, and we just proved her advice was right.

Unfortunately we lost all the chestnuts, but that was a lesson well learned. We learned a lot from that, and subsequently now we've learned how to protect--we think we have--make a physical

barrier around the nuts to protect them from predation by rodents. And I personally think we're going to have to do more than that to keep other critters, I'll call them, from preying on the seedlings and the nuts that we don't even know about yet.

So, I look back to solve that problem in our agricultural cousins, if you will, farmers who do this every year with all kinds of grains, corn grains, small grains, and see them do it very successfully by treating their seeds with all kinds of repellants and so forth. We may have to get into that when we get into large scale production of chestnut seedlings. That's some of the things I've learned in seventeen years--well, the last seven years of my job with the Pennsylvania chapter and some of the things that I just told you I learned from them and other things I learned in nursery and I inform Pennsylvania chapter members about, but if you talk to members of this chapter, Pennsylvania chapter, and other chapters too who have planted acorns and also chestnuts they all have the same problems. It's just how do you defeat these little critters that want to eat this wonderful food you're putting out there?

So, we know it's a good nut, and however, we do know that when the nuts were plentiful many, many years ago the chestnut forests replenished themselves in spite of all the squirrels that were running around eating the nuts. The good thing about it is that chestnuts are an annual crop. They produce annually; it's not a two year term or longer. So, when we get trees producing we'll have hopefully large crops every year and then bumper crops of chestnuts maybe four or five years apart.

BB: Sounds good. Well, is there any other memories you have or stories that come to the surface?

AD: I've always been impressed with the ingenuity of our members who bring artifacts or pieces of chestnut wood and make into all kinds of useful instruments and so forth. I hope that that trend continues. It's one way to do outreach to members who aren't members--for people who aren't member of a chapter and probably have some kind of interest if they only knew about it in restoring a tree to its native range. The ingenuity and the craftsmanship that I see on some of our displays our members making these wonderful articles, useful articles is truly amazing, and I hope that continues.

BB: Sounds good. Anything else you want to say?

AD: No, that's all for right now.