

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA

Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Interview date:

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Interviewer: Bethany Baxter

Interviewee: Michael Doochin

Interview Location: The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) 2008 annual meeting
Chattanooga, TN

Transcriber: Iliza Myers

BB: Okay, I'm going to press record. The first thing I need to do is give you this statement telling what I'm doing. It's another formality.

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 for further use in efforts to promote a better understanding of the role of the American chestnut.

Have you signed the participant identification and release agreement?

MD: Yes.

BB: Okay, great. Now you can start. Maybe first just tell me who you are, where you're from.

MD: Okay, Michael Doochin from Nashville, Tennessee. I grew up in Nashville, moved away, came back. Any specific questions you'd like to ask me?

BB: Um, I'm just curious--here is just like--yeah, if you just have some stories that you want to tell, please share them. And I'm curious too why are you involved with the chestnut foundation?

MD: Well, it's kind of one of those things where things happen to you in life where you feel like you're meant to be there, and it's divine province. I grew up--my grandparents--I would see wormy chestnut in different places, thought it was a very interesting wood. When I was ten, my grandparents moved into a house, which had a study out of wormy chestnut. Some furniture in it was paneled in wormy chestnut. I thought it was very beautiful. It was a part of their house, it was a very nice house, and the part that I liked best and I would remember my grandparents sitting a lot. They had a little TV in there.

So, when I went to college in New England, there was a lot of woods around. There was a research area, and I would see wormy chestnut stumps. This was in northwestern Massachusetts. I knew about it, and then I graduated and moved to Washington D.C., had a course--went to the agriculture department and had a course in the eastern forests of the United States, read Lucy Brown's book, and saw again more stumps, but then I saw some living trees. Some large living trees and didn't know why they hadn't gotten the blight. One of them I remember they thought

was sterile, and it disturbed me very much. Didn't know anything about any efforts to do that, and this was before the American Chestnut Foundation started up.

When I moved to Nashville there was a place where we belonged, and I saw brochure and joined, I remember it was late '80s, joined if I recall correctly the American Chestnut Foundation. Didn't really participate, would get their literature and read up on it. Someone I knew, I had talked to--actually it was an insurance agent on the area where I was working and was doing some work for us, and he knew of my interest and he said, "Well, you should contact Scott Schlarbaum. He's at UT."

And I did. And Scott was interested in starting up a chapter, not necessarily with TACF but local organization. But I'd ask him for some varieties. He gave me some places to order some chestnut American grafts.

And so, we had chestnuts. These trees came up, and they were basically Chinese chestnuts sweet heart tree, which was supposed to be some American. And we'd bring them home. My kids were very young at that age, and they would see them and they'd see the burrs. When the oldest reached ten he would roam down in the forest. We had a forest behind us. Nashville is a limestone basin. And so, we live in Davidson County; however, we live on a ridge, and I'd often wondered--I saw a tree in the back, a stump in the back of the yard, and I'm thinking, "That's old and it hasn't rotted. You know, I wonder if that's American chestnut." It was right by the house and there were some other signs, and I thought, "You know, I'm wondering if they're--"

I said, "But you know it's acidic up here, it's basic, it's alkaline down below, but who would think that we had American chestnut. That would be--"

So one day he came up from the woods--there's a whole patch of woods behind our house and other woods with these burrs, and he said, "We have American chestnut." Just based on the burrs that he'd see at home, that I brought home. And I said, "Jonathan, I really don't think so, but we'll go down and check it out. It's probably Chinese or some hybrid."

I got down there, and at that time it was forty feet tall. It was about five and a half inches deviation. I was able to get the lower branches on it. Took one in to--there was a herbarium in

Vanderbilt, which is since gone out to Texas. I took it down there, and I said, "Sure does look like American chestnut to me." And he said, "It is." And I'm really disappointed. I'm looking at him. [laughs] He says, "Someone else had a chestnut at one point in Davidson County. I was hoping for chinquapin" and all this kind of stuff.

So, anyway I contacted Scott, and I said, "You know, I can't see if this tree has the blight on it."

And he said, "Well, Mike it's probably going to get the blight. It's about the time."

I said, "No, this tree is forty feet long. It's got some blue sky, and it's shooting for the light. Obviously it has some burrs on it, so it's flowering." Anyway, so nothing much happened. We continued to observe the tree, go down there, and I didn't see any blight.

Well, when the Tennessee chapter opened up--this is in 2002, actually it started in 2001, but the initial officers, at least the president weren't that active, but they did have one meeting. We weren't even a 501c yet. So we started talking about they wanted to identify mother trees, and I said, "Well, I have a tree."

And there was Paul Sisco there, and he said, "Well, just send me a branch, a leaf."

I said, "Paul, I can't reach the leaves anymore." He's looking at me like 'yeah, right.'

And I said, "No, seriously it's been identified as American chestnut. I can't reach the leaves. The branch is too high. A few years ago I could reach it, but that branch has died out and I don't even have anything I can reach up there and get it."

And he said, "I just can't do anything about that."

And I said, "Well, you know you're five minutes--I know you're going back to Ashville." He told me where he lived. "And you're five minutes from--I'll get you back on the road in five minutes."

So, we walked down there. It's pretty steep, but you can walk down there in a fairly short period of time. And he said, "Nah. If you can't send me a branch--"

So, we were getting ready to leave, and it was getting late, and he says, "Now where do you live?"

So, he came over, and he looked at the tree. We didn't have many mother trees at that point. He looks at the tree, and he says, "My God." He said, "It really is American chestnut." [laughs]

I said, "Yeah, I told you that."

He said, "I'm really sorry I've walked two miles for a maple before." [laughs]

So we identified it and there were some people who came over, and you probably met Clint and you met Joe Schibig. So they were over looking at the trees, and they got some samples off of it, and we were doing some grafting at that point. Basically that tree is--and we had tree climbers up there. First it was a mother tree now we got pollen off of it in 2007. So it's got a lot of seeds out there now, so it's really in the system. It wasn't very successful as a mother tree, because it wasn't flowing much. And they kept telling me to open it up and take some trees off and some trees around there, but realistically it was doing well. I didn't want to do anything that might stress it, might get the blight.

After that point, this was about ten years later, and at this point I had a son--I have three children and my youngest was home. So he was out there with me, and he had gone to this meeting in 2002. He went down in the forest and found six other chestnut trees. One was small and had the blight and it died, but the other ones were of varying sizes of fifteen, eighteen feet. And then we had one that the bark is furring and obviously is quite mature, but it's not flowering and it's not that tall because it's dark above it. Of course, people told me, Take the trees out it'll flower. And that's something Hill has said, and I said "There's a reason why these trees don't have the blight, and I'm not going to stress them." Since then I've talked to quite a number of people who have told me the same thing. They have these theories that when trees start growing rapidly, you open them up, they stress themselves out and have the blight. These trees are doing well.

So, there are two major trees here, and a number of other smaller trees that look quite healthy. We've had droughts on the ridge in the last two years, but they seem to be holding on. I haven't been down to see the bigger one recently.

So that's kind of the divine providence that brought me into the organization. I became involved with the Tennessee chapter and getting the 501c was really took over it at that point, and on the board, and on the cabinets.

I don't know if you have any questions really.

BB: Not really. That was great. I'm really just curious today what kind of story do you have off the top of your head and why you are you involved.

MD: Okay.

BB: That was great. Thank you for coming in and sharing that.