

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA

# Chestnut Memories

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## Oral History Transcript

Interview date:

**24-26** October 2008

Interviewer: Bethany Baxter (and Jim Pfitzer)

Interviewees: Martin Rutter & Brandon Rutter

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

Transcriber: Iliza Myers

**Audio File:**

BB: Oh, there we go. I have it now.

JP: Is that a stereo input or a signal channel?

BB: I put in mic for some reason. Yeah, sorry.

JP: Okay, there we go. Now were cooking.

BB: Long weekend. All right I just did that statement, and first thing will you just tell me your name and how old you are and where you're from.

MR: My name is Martin Rutter. I'm ninety-six. Presently I live in Florida.

BB: Great.

MR: I grew up in Ohio, and anything I know about chestnuts I saw there.

BB: Well, what do you remember--

MR: I can say that the first chestnuts that I ever picked were in 1920. On our farm we had four trees, four chestnut trees all at about forty feet. Isolated trees. This is in Ray County Ohio. We're just a mile from Lake Eerie.

BB: We've been talking to a lot of people in the southern part of the country, and most people around here talk about feeding chestnuts to their hogs and building things out of chestnut and eating chestnuts. Is that the same kind of things that y'all experienced up there?

MR: No, our experience with those trees were that I watched them die at that time they started. So in five or six years they were dead. Blight. That is the tops died, they grow back, but about that time our barn burned down, so we built a barn out of chestnut trees, what we had. We didn't have the chestnuts for food for pigs or anything else. It's not very much we didn't rely on chestnut food to eat or anything like that. They were just good timber, and timber normally for building a barn or anything else. In that area all they carried this. There were other chestnut trees around there. There were many along the lake. My brother lived about thirty miles east of there, and he had what was left of the chestnut trees. Chestnut trees would live a long time. At least, after they died there were still there. They cut down a lot of them and made--they built apartment houses out of them too. That's where a fellow first saw chestnuts. He got interested in them by the time he.

BB: What was the sentiment around the time that those trees were dying out? I guess you would have been kind of young, right?

MR: What's that?

BB: You were pretty young when the chestnut trees were first blighting out?

MR: Oh, yeah.

BB: So, do you remember how your parents felt, or do you remember how people kind of responded to the blight? Were they upset about it, or did they just take it like a fact of life type thing?

MR: I don't understand the question.

BB: When the trees got blighted out, do you remember anybody saying anything or do you remember reading anything about it?

MR: No, not very much. In that particular area there were not that many trees. They were commercially a problem. There were a few around but scattered. You'd see like three on our farm or something. I probably never saw more than twenty chestnut trees up in that area. I don't think that area was a big habitat area for chestnuts. There were a lot of trees in that area at one time. Just like everything else, at one time it was all forest. Indians come along and burned a lot of them, British come along and burned a lot of them. They used up a lot of them in the same way that the timber in the rest of the world is being cut down a lot. We blame it on them, but we did the same thing.

BB: Do you remember what you told your sons or I don't know if you had any daughters too, but do you remember what you told your kids about chestnut when they were young?

MR: Nothing.

BB: Never did say anything about it?

So, what were you saying when your son first heard about chestnut or when he first learned about them?

MR: No, he was only about eight or ten years old.

BB: Why do you think your son got so into all this chestnut breeding and stuff? How did he get interested in all that?

MR: I don't understand. I don't have anything to do with chestnut breeding or anything else?

BB: Yeah, I'm wondering how your son got so interested in it.

MR: Well, I'd say he saw the trees at my brother's place after I was gone away, and Donald became interested in them, I guess.

BB: Why do you think all these people are so excited about chestnut trees? Or what about it makes them want to bring this tree back?

MR: No comment about it. In many areas chestnuts were so--you read a lot about how there were many, many trees there. It was the biggest ecological disaster that you had there for awhile. I could drive from my place and go to pick him up from school and look at the forest and see many, many dead trees. That's got to impress you. I personally didn't have much to do with it.

BB: Do you remember anything else just about growing up in--you said you grew up in Michigan, right? Or Ohio?

MR: Ohio.

BB: Ohio, sorry. I was just looking at Lake Eerie and was thinking Michigan. What else do you remember growing up in Ohio or kind of any memories jump out at you about growing up there?

MR: About chestnuts you mean?

BB: Or just about anything in general.

MR: No, I was just lucky to grow up in the area I guess. On a farming area, it's lucky to get off the farm.

BB: What did you do when you got off the farm?

MR: I went to school and got a--I'm a civil engineer. I pursued that the rest of my life in school and teaching and in the navy. Construction throughout the Pacific.

BB: Neat. Well, that's just about all the questions I have.

JP: Well, do you want to shift to Brandon then while we've got it running?

BB: Sure, yeah.

JP: He's sitting there so patient and so quiet, and I know he's about to explode with information for us.

BR: Don't know a whole lot about stuff in the 1920s myself.

MR: Don't make it too long.

BB: Yeah, we'll make it quick. But I remember yesterday you told me that you grew up kind of on the chestnut orchard. What do you remember about growing up?

BR: Yeah. Well, I grew up on the farm there, and so there have always been chestnut trees and living ones. And I have been doing engineering school for quite awhile myself, so I've been a bit disconnected from it for awhile now. But I certainly remember--a lot of my early memories are actually involve--you know, dad would be away on trips for a couple of weeks at a time, and it was putting together the chestnut foundation. And for awhile 1-800-TACF was a number I could call if I didn't have money at the pay phone, because that went to our house. I don't think I ever actually used it, but you know.

Dad talked about the yellow Corolla that grandpa got for him, for us way back there. I was actually on that trip, and it was when I was five. So it was about twenty-five years ago. We rode down here, and you know, I was five years old, so I don't remember a lot about the amazing chestnut trees that were kind of just an idea in this area at that time. That trip--the thing I remember the most--I forget what place it was in the great smokies, but there's a very impressive lookout, and we went hiking and I hiked five miles and I was very proud of it. The first thing I told my mother when we got back home.

There were these trees that farmers would plant on their homesteads. That had been all throughout the Midwest and including even in Minnesota and Iowa. We were right down in the southeastern corner there, and there are a couple of trees that I can remember visiting many times in those very early years. I think even before the foundation was started. Dad and Trousburnum had kind of been working on the stuff, and Dad had started doing some of the crossing already. And some of the pure American stuff that he used for that first investigation were from these farmstead American chestnuts around. And so, we'd have--people would hear that there was somebody looking for chestnuts, and there'd be the chestnut out in the barnyard. A lot of it was driving around looking for--and you know, quite a few of them are Chinese or crosses, but every once and awhile one would be a pure American. Usually from somebody who had brought some out in their pocket out to the think or something.

So, I remember a couple of those that we had visited a lot. I don't know that I had any purpose there other than just kind of being there. But, Dad climbing up in the tree and pollinating stuff. Big old trees, and that was some of the first stuff that was going on there. That was kind of neat.

JP: Did you share the excitement at that age five, six, seven years old when you'd find out this was a pure American tree, was that something that you would get excited about?

BR: I don't think I knew it enough to be like "oh, this is a pure American tree" other than to share a little bit of my dad's excitement. The whole priority for me at that point was just kind of more just like another thing that made my dad cool.

JP: Talk about that a little bit, because that was going to be my next question. What was your impression of all of this? So, this kind of made you dad really cool. Obviously we know he's a cool guy, but for a five, six, seven year old you never know what makes a dad cool.

BR: Yeah, well that's kind of a long story. I'd be happy to talk to you about that at length at some point, but I don't want to hold him up too much right this instant. Generally, we lived as you heard in the talk there off the grid. We actually do have a real phone line coming in, so there is a line connecting our house to the world. And if you get dad over and ask him what their friends thought of that when we moved out, and they thought, You have a real phone? Sell-outs! I thought you were for real!

But, everything else is disconnected basically. It's a very different and very interesting way to live. On the one hand we were not as much a part of the local culture as most of the kids my age were, but on the other hand, we had people visiting us from all over the world, which was kind of interesting.

JP: Kind of the center of your own culture?

MR: Yeah. From earliest memory it was like, "Oh, yeah these guys are visiting from Sweden, and this guy came over from to do a study on chestnuts from China." Stuff like that. So, it was interesting.

BB: That's pretty cool.

Well, we don't want to hold y'all up.

JP: Yeah, sounds like y'all need to go.