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An oral history of the American chestnut in southern Appalachia

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Abstract

This oral history research explored and examined the experiences and memories of people who lived in the Southern Appalachian region during the years preceding and following the chestnut blight pandemic. The project examined experiences from an environmental history perspective, addressing the economic and cultural significance of chestnut pre and post blight, and attitudes and feelings concerning American chestnut restoration efforts. The American Chestnut Oral History Collection includes forty-five interviews, recorded between May and December 2008. Twenty-seven of them were recorded with people who have memories of the importance of American chestnut in southern Appalachia. These interviews were conducted across Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, and Virginia. These twenty-seven recordings represent thirty-three interviewees who range in age from 60 to 94 years old. An additional eighteen recordings were made at The American Chestnut Foundation's 25th Anniversary Meeting in October 2008 representing nineteen Foundation members. All recordings were transcribed. The stories of fifty-two people are archived in the present Collection. Recorded accounts of the American chestnut articulate the importance of American chestnut to the people in southern Appalachia. These documented thoughts on restoration also lend insight into why individuals undertake efforts of this magnitude. Many TACF members, who are active in the restoration of American chestnut, first encountered the American chestnut through a shared story or experience with a parent or grandparent. It is my hope that these recordings will be useful in educating and connecting younger generations with the American chestnut and the restoration effort.

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Appalachia (/ˌæpəˈleɪtʃə, -leɪʃə, -lətʃə/) is a cultural region in the Eastern United States that stretches from the Southern Tier of New York State to northern Alabama and Georgia. While the Appalachian Mountains stretch from Belle Isle in Canada to Cheaha Mountain in Alabama, the cultural region of Appalachia typically refers only to the central and southern portions of the range, from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, southwesterly to the Great Smoky Mountains. As of the 2010 United States Native Americans of Appalachian Kentucky. Contrary to popular myths, American Indians have lived in Kentucky since time immemorial. When Kentucky was declared the fifteenth state on June 1,

1792, more than twenty tribes, including the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Chippewa, Delaware, Eel River, Haudenosaunee, Kaskaskia, Kickapoo, Miami, Ottawa, Piankeshaw, Potawatomi, Shawnee, Wea, and Wyandot, held legal claims to the land. These modern misconceptions of biology and culture can be traced to the very beginning of the state. In the complete absence of a single genetic laboratory, the Shawnee Treaty of 1831 was used to define and enforce who was a "real" American Indian and who was not. American, Chinese, and three levels of American-backcross chestnut were used in the study. The objective of the study was to determine if differences in performance and growth exist between the five genotypes of chestnut when grown on formerly surface mined lands. Sites were selected by TACF in cooperation with research scientists at the University of Kentucky, the University of Tennessee, Ohio University, West Virginia University, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Maryland. Reforestation of mined lands has become a preferred post-mining land use in some parts of Appalachia since the Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative began.