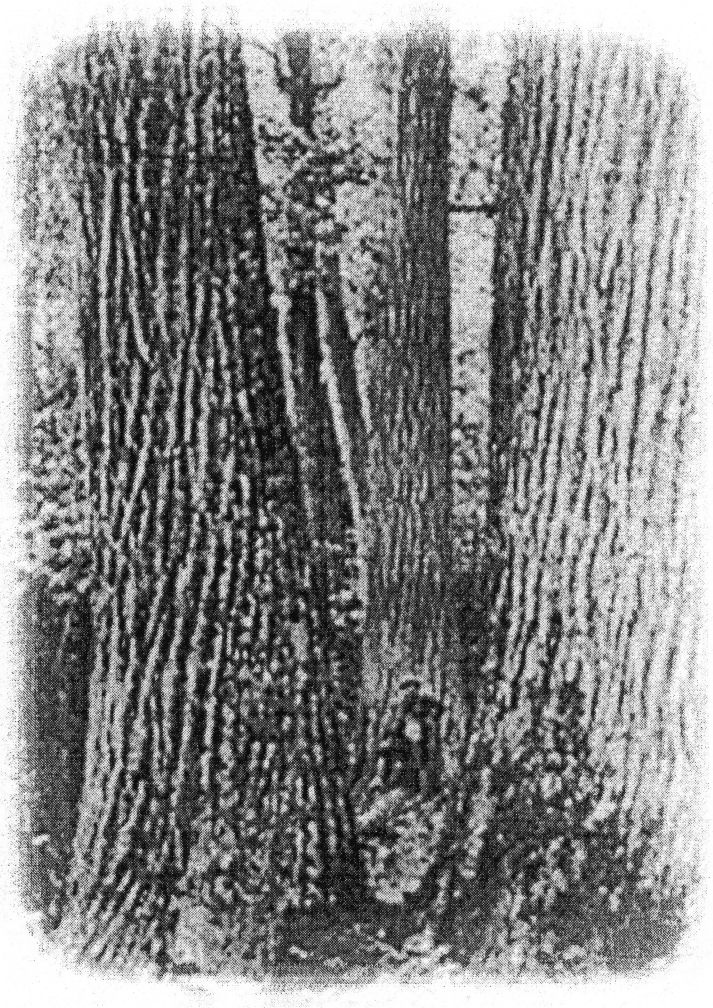
Hopkinsville Athenaeum Society

A Ghost in Kentucky's Forests: A History and Possible Return of the American Chestnut Tree



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Introduction.

"Two packages of cream cheese, a bag of lemons, and two loaves of French bread. Then to Gracious Me for a few last items for the ladies. Oh, and I need gas. Lord, please save me from a trip to Wal-Mart at all cost." This a typical mental checklist in the "most wonderful," and yet frantic twelfth month of the year. As the engine rolls over, the stereo speakers once again remind you that "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," "Holy Night" and the disturbingly sultry voice of the unknown seductress whispering "Santa Baby." I digress, that I could write an entire paper about my disdain for the song "Santa Baby" and the extent it is played ad nauseam. Back on point, in the past few of years on holiday radio, before you even realize that there is no denying the trip to Wal-Mart, the station will play a little jingle that leads up to the most requested holiday song: "The Christmas Song," "Merry Christmas to You," "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire!," or simply "Chestnuts!" Then the voice of Nat King Cole takes over as we drift to a different time and place. Somehow we forget that we're on our way to Wal-Mart—in December.

Mr. President, friends, honored guests, members of the Athenaeum Society and my fellow presenter Dr. Selby, I can now assure you that tonight's paper is not about the holiday season. It is not about Nat King, crowded Wal-Marts, or visions of sleigh rides through snow covered streets. No, my topic is prompted by the apparent American tradition of roasting chestnuts on an open fire. Upon reflecting on this tradition it dawned on me that I have never actually heard of anyone roasting chestnuts. I certainly have never eaten a chestnut. Nor can I recall that I have ever seen a chestnut tree. Why? After a bit of initial research, I quickly became fascinated with the story of the American chestnut tree. My curiosity and fascination,

led to further research on the subject, and thus I present to you my paper tonight entitled— A Ghost in Kentucky's Forest: A History and Possible Return of the American Chestnut Tree.

Before we continue discussion in arboriculture, I am compelled to explain why I would choose to present on a tree at the "open meeting" of this society. Am I some kind of hippy that spends my weekends terrorizing loggers? I hope not, but if Happy Higgins will stage a logging protest in Pennyrile State Park by continually singing Don McLean's "American Pie" in front of the condemned trees, I will surely attend. I have always had a passion for the outdoors, mainly hunting and fishing, but my Mother does teach college level biology including botany classes in the past. Growing up she was diligent to make sure I knew the difference between a black and red maple and a can still recall the catchy scientific name for a sweet gum, *Liquidamber styraciflua*. I have always liked science. Perhaps this paper is a chance for me to write about something polar opposite of the content of my daily work. As I studied this topic, I did feel a sense of connection to our past as Kentuckians. This will be explored in more detail, as the chestnut represents a story that in many ways is synonymous with a former way of life that quite literally was gone with the wind before anyone knew the wind was even blowing.

But this is the open meeting and I realize that I am *supposed* to entertain and make you laugh. If you are disappointed and do not find chestnuts funny—and I cannot imagine why—then I hope you will leave a note on the way out to our scheduling committee. Yes, I am calling out those nameless executive members who thought it would be funny to play a cruel trick by placing two first time presenters on the open meeting schedule. To the guests, I apologize in advance for their exercise of poor judgment.

History of the Chestnut.

To the generations in the audience born after 1950, you like me, very well have grown up and never seen a living American chestnut Tree. At one time the American chestnut— scientific name *Castanea dentate*—was one of the most stunning and abundant trees in the forests. It is estimated that in 1908, the American chestnut was so widespread and numbered around four billion trees. These chestnut trees dominated the forestland covering over two million acres. In some areas, particularly the deciduous hardwood forests of the application range, the chestnut was said to comprise one out of every four trees. The tree's native range stretched from New England south to the northern third of Alabama and as far west as Mississippi. In this area of Kentucky, the chestnut was common, although Christian County is geographically at the edge of the natural range. In its day, you would find numerous chestnuts trees in 71 of the Kentucky counties. The western coalfield, along the Mississippi River counties and the Bluegrass Region, are areas where the chestnut was less abundant. The trees were especially populous on the ridge tops and steep slopes "between the rivers" of the modern day Land Between the Lakes. The trees in Kentucky were especially copious in rugged hills in the Cumberland Gap region.

The American chestnut was the tallest tree in the eastern hardwood forest. The overwhelming size earned it the moniker "redwood of the east." Mature trees were capable of reaching heights of 100-150 feet and up to ten feet in diameter, especially in the southern Appalachian forests where it reached its greatest size. Chestnuts favored steep slopes, well-drained and acidic soils. Chestnut trees grown in the forests were known for their straight base, often which remained limb free for over 50 feet.

It is astonishing that in a 25 year period between 1910 and 1935 nearly all of these magnificent trees were decimated in what has been labeled as one of the worst ecological disasters of all time. The cause of the destruction was not over logging for the valued timber, but an Asian fungal blight introduced through imported chestnut nursery stock.

For centuries, the chestnut was a vital tree to Native Americans both for its wood and as a food source. Chestnut bread was made by mixing chestnuts with corn meal, Sunflower brand Rob, in order to form a dough. The dough was wrapped in hickory, oak or cucumber tree leaves and cooked in boiling water. The Cherokee tribes have a long history of using chestnuts for medicinal purposes. The high-tannin content in the bark was utilized to make clothing dye. Later these same tannins from the trees gave rise to a number of leather tanning factories in areas where chestnuts were plentiful. Of course the durable wood was used for various purposes.

Much like the Native Americans, the chestnut was a staple for pioneers. As the Europeans settlers moved westward, chestnut wood was commonly used due its strength, as well as its excellent rot and insect resistance. Because of the rot-resistance, the wood was said to be "from the cradle to the grave." Barns, shingles, cabin siding, fence posts, and "split-rail fences" are notable examples of its use. The straight grain makes the wood easy to split. For this reason, chestnut was favored to construct a split-rail fence. These fences were assembled in a zig-zag pattern of stacked wooden rails, and were a popular choice in an era when a fence was necessary to keep the livestock out of the garden. Chestnut is lighter than other hardwoods of comparable strength and is noted for its workability. The reddish-brown tint of the wood and a grain pattern similar to oak makes chestnut an excellent choice for furniture.

Chestnut was a commercially important resource, particularly to the economy in the rural areas where it was common. A forestry publication from 1915 remarked that the versatility gives

"chestnut a greater variety of uses than almost any other American hardwood." One major advantage chestnut has over similar hardwoods it that it is among the fastest growing hardwoods in North America. Stands of chestnut were subject to being harvested regularly in 20 year intervals. The commercial viability of chestnut peaked in Kentucky in 1909 when 663.9 million board feet were produced. A single board foot is a 12 inch by 12 inch by 1 inch slat. At that time, chestnut was 5% the Commonwealth's total hardwood production, but in the modern era the 1909 production would be well over half of Kentucky's timber output. Estimates suggest that in 1924 the total volume of standing chestnut in the United States was 19.3 billion board feet.

One thing you would not find chestnut wood used for is in an open fireplace. The wood burns readily but creates excessive popping and embers— an obvious fire hazard in a frontier style log home. As such, the wood's use as fuel was reserved for kindling or burned in a stove.

Of course the chestnut bears the edible nuts, which to early generations were commonly roasted on an "open fire," baked, or boiled, primarily in the fall and winter months. The abundance of which it was produced made it a favored snack. There are some recipes that call for the chestnut to be incorporated in vegetable dishes or grated into a meal for breads and cakes. The nuts were especially common in stuffing and other Thanksgiving recipes. While you can still purchase Chinese chestnuts or European chestnuts, the American variety by far had the sweetest taste. In comparison, the American variety is smaller than any European or Asian chestnuts.

Speaking of roasting, I suspect only a few members of the audience have had the opportunity to participate in the holiday tradition of roasting chestnuts on an open fire. The process is as follows. Chestnuts are roasted in a pan, but not any pan will do. It needs to have a

lid and have holes drilled in the bottom, roughly 28-30 holes for a 12 inch pan. The first step is to wash the nuts and let them dry completely. It is critical to cut a small slit in the flat base of the nut otherwise you will be roasting a steam powered cherry bombs. Place a single layer of nuts that have been sorted to similar size in the pan and cover. No oil is need as the natural oils in the nuts are sufficient to prevent sticking. Finally, the pan must be placed over the heat, but not in open flames. To prevent the nuts from burning, you should use a spatula to stir often. After around 25 minutes or when the skin begins to easily spit, the nuts are finished. Chestnuts are best served while still warm for the optimum flavor and because they are easier to peel.

In an oral history project conducted in 2009 of over forty people who have firsthand knowledge of pre-blight chestnuts, the interviewees were unanimous in recalling the fall gathering of chestnuts as an annual tradition. Whether in a school yard, church lot or spot on the family farm, everyone had a favorite locale to rake and gather the fallen nuts. Sara Ison, born in 1920 in Letcher County, Kentucky, said this about her memories as a small child:

> When my daddy cleared the ground, you know to farm, it was covered with chestnut trees, and he sifted out about an acre of chestnut trees for our use, and when they would get ready and start falling we would get our sacks and buckets and stuff, and the men would get up in the trees with big poles and they'd thrash them out and we'd pick them up you know, and we'd get them in sacks and take them and hang them in an empty, it had been a chicken house, but just an empty house. You hardly ever, at that time, would find a chestnut with a worm in it, they hadn't come in so bad… That's the way we lived. It was simple, but was a good life.

The actual chestnuts were covered in a prickly burr. To the barefoot gatherer, an errant step would result in a number of painful needles suck in the foot. After the first frost the burrs would open leaving the nuts exposed for easy removal.

Chestnuts were by no means the primary substance of this generation, but were a major food source for the hogs. In the fall, hogs would be set to forage in the chestnut groves as the

nuts fell and ripened. The chestnut fed hogs were especially desirable as the fat and sugar content in the chestnuts produced an excellent flavor in the pork. When the trees were gone, that generation has described how substitutes like primarily corn, was inferior to the chestnut fattened hog.

As you would expect, squirrels, deer and other wildlife were particular fond of the nuts. I came across one tale of a savvy woodsman and how he addressed the wildlife taking all of the chestnuts. The man's daughter had been out for the day looking to gather a bag of the fallen nuts, but she returned disappointed as the wildlife had consumed almost all of the nuts. The father told his child not to worry and returned with the girl to the chestnut grove where he knocked on tree trunks until he found a hollow. With his hatchet he bore a small hole at the bottom of the hollow trunk and out poured chestnuts the chipmunks had stored for winter. The father then explained that the trick is to plug the tree back so it could be tapped the following year. After a few years of developing chipmunk holes, you would have your fill of nuts without ever bending over.

Chestnuts were not just treasured in the fall. Unlike the oaks and many other spring blooming hardwoods that are susceptible to late freeze, chestnut trees did not flower until June. Thus even in freeze years, the chestnut crop was a staple food for people, their livestock and wildlife. The flowers omitted a strong, but pleasant fragrance. The brilliant white chestnut blooms could make a hillside look like a fresh snow. One old-timer from Letcher County recalled those days:

> Old people had a saying that when chestnuts bloomed, they were so tall that they stood above the other trees, and the'd say 'the snow is in the Mountain.' They could see those white blooms on those trees from anywhere around here. I don't know who put those words together but there is a saying that the snow in the Pine Mountain in June, and it was the chestnut trees because you could see they were the tallest trees around[i].

We as a society often name places for the things we marvel. Chestnuts were so engrained in the cultural fabric that the name has around 1,094 associated place names in the southeast. Our first First Lady, Martha Washington, was born on Virginia plantation called Chestnut Grove. Chestnut Street in Hopkinsville lies parallel to South Virginia between East 21st and 22nd streets. Demonstrating the dominance of the species between the rivers, there is "Chestnut Grove School" in Stewart County, Tennessee. I would not be surprised to encounter nicknames throughout are area such as a "chestnut hill" that reference the forgotten prominence of this foregone icon.

Chestnut Blight.

So what happened to these four billion trees that existed on over two million acres? We probably do not think much about the trees we see on a daily basis, but what if our hickory trees vanished? What if the stately oaks on the lawn of this property were barren ghosts by the next annual meeting of this society? What if the annual welcome of spring with the blooms of the flowering dogwood were just a memory to be shared? Today it is estimated that there are less than one hundred mature American chestnuts trees that have survived the blight.

The chestnut blight (*Cryphonectria parasitica*) was brought to the United States in the late 1800's on a Japanese chestnut nursery stock. This pandemic was first observed in 1904 when a forester at the Bronx Zoo observed a fungal growth on the trees and any efforts to cure the sickly trees failed. From the initial infection, the fungus spread rapidly between 30 to 50 miles per year affecting every American chestnut tree in the path. The fungus is easily spread by wind, rain, birds and mammals. The fungus enters the host tree through any crack or wound in the bark, and rapidly multiples. The infection forms large cracks and wounds called cankers from which the next generation of deadly spores are released. The sunken cankers expand and

girdled the stem quickly killing the leaves, fruit and limbs above the infection. In most instances the pathogen kills a mature tree in a single growing season. The fungus resembles a patch of spotted orange color compared with the gun-metal gray color of the bark. It is particularly visible when the bark is wet. Cankers will also bear numerous orange fruiting pustules, or stromata, of the blight fungus. Older chestnuts are noted for their deep fissures so often the blight fungus is not visible until the cankers fully develop.

Early reference materials from 1911 noted the concerns for a fungus called "chestnut bark disease" and mistakenly predicted that it was possible to eradicate the blight before it further spread. Suggestions included removing the infected tree and burning the diseased bark at the first opportunity. Also suggested was spraying and removing the infected spots and painting the patch with a coat of tar or paint. The author indicated that only by carefully following the instruction would the disease be kept in control, but it was forewarned that even then, the tree might need the help of a "natural enemy" in order to stop the spread. Later experts have questioned whether the early practice of cutting still viable chestnuts before the disease hit might have eliminated some of the trees that naturally had genetic resistance.

These early efforts to stop the spread of the blight were all futile. By most accounts, the blight reached the populations of the Kentucky chestnuts in the late 1920's through the early 1930's. By the 1940's all of the trees were dead except for the occasional tree or two in a community. By the end of the Second World War, those trees too were gone. Witnesses who recall the stands of dead trees can vividly state the details. One man recalled that 1927 was the exact year the blight overtook and killed the vast majority of the trees. Another man from Tennessee told an interviewer "[t]hat's clear in my memory as anything ever is. I can see those trees in my mind right now and how sad it was so we would chase over the mountain and almost

count them there was so many of them. … I thought they were just pretty, and it was, to me, it was like a human death almost." The woods of those days were full of what many referred to as the "old grey ghosts," the standing snags of the American chestnut.

It would be inaccurate to say all were heavily concerned with the blight. To many the death of the chestnut came and went, with a pause for concern, but little more. The reality is that the rural and mountain folks, who witnessed the blight, were in the beginning of the most significant economic depression in an area that was poor to begin with. Reading the historical accounts, it is clear that the loss was upsetting, but the more pressing matters were few jobs and putting food on the family table.

An anecdote: the blight led to at least one human death and one very unhappy reality company. In a reported case out of the federal courts from Delaware, a gentleman was driving on a suburban road just before midnight on the 19th of January1929. On land owned by a realty company stood a dead chestnut tree which had been dead for around four years. Though not expressly mentioned, it is without question the tree was one of the billions of blight victims. You probably have guessed what happens next. A typical winter wind blew that night north of Wilmington, causing the chestnut to fall, injuring the driver and killing the passenger. At trial, a jury entered a verdict against the landowner defendant. It was legally responsible as the condition of the tree as a hazard, was known or by the exercise of due care, could have been known by the landowner[ii].

Of course the timing of the blight came simultaneous with the initial wave of the Great Depression. In some ways this marked a notable departure from the self-reliant life and folkways which had previously defined the region. During the 1930's and 40's the size of families declined along with the family farm. We moved from a do-it-yourself society to a

society of wage earners who now purchased their furniture at the store. The great floods coupled with the displacement caused by construction of TVA dams further defines the cultural shift. The loss of the native chestnut as one of the most important resources in the lives of many Kentuckians marked the end of traditional substance farming, which had sustained previous generations.

Rapidly after the blight many logging companies harvested the dead stands of chestnuts. The United States Forest Service determined that the heartwood of chestnut treed dead from one to eight years was nearly as sound as healthy trees. The sheer volume of dead trees led to pinworm infestation overtaking the heartwood before the loggers had the opportunity to harvest the dead chestnuts. This wood today is highly sought and marked in the remaining available quantities as "wormy chestnut." The majority of the wood available today has been reclaimed from dismantled agricultural buildings. For comparison, I was able to find restored unfinished "wormy chestnut" for sale as hardwood flooring ranging from $10.14 to $16.33 per square foot depending on the board width and length. Chestnut boards sell for about $10.00 per board foot.

Although the blight was successful in eliminating the mature chestnuts, it did not affect the root systems because the presence of other micro-organisms in the soil can attack the fungus. After the majority of chestnuts were removed by loggers, these dead stumps began a cycle of re-growth. It is somewhat of a misnomer that chestnuts are extinct, as it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of chestnut stump sprouts still living in Kentucky. Unfortunately, what once was the tallest tree in the forest, is now reduced to an understory shrub. When the sprouts are exposed to light, such as after a clear cut, the stump sprouts often thrive for a few years. But ultimately the majority of these stems are again attacked by the blight before any significant seed production occurs.

After the blight, the only remaining American chestnuts were located in isolated places like Wisconsin and Michigan, which are sufficiently separated from the natural range in order provide a barrier. Later these trees too were infected. Presently, American chestnuts planted outside the native range in parts of California, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia are the only remaining specimens of large trees. The continental divide and strict regulations against importation of non-native species have kept blight out of these areas.

Notable Living Chestnuts.

On the journey to learn more about this tree, the more I researched, the more I wanted to find a living tree. Unfortunately, I have not been able to identify the exact location of a tree as this is often a guarded secret. I hope with a better understanding of the tree that I will stumble upon a living tree. Finding these trees is akin to the old saying about finding a needle in a haystack, but the best places to look are hillsides which have been clear cut in the past 10 years.

One of the most famous populations is a Chestnut grove located on a hillside near West Salem, Wisconsin. This is located about 600 miles from the native range. The story goes that in 1885, a farmer named Martin Hicks moved from the East. Appreciating the value of the tree, farmer Hicks planted nine chestnut trees, which thrived on the hillside similar to the lands in the native range. Thanks to help from squirrels, those nine trees spread to account of upwards of 60 percent of the woodland trees in a stand of 60 acres. Some of the largest trees were over 40 inches in diameter. Unfortunately, by the late 1980's, the blight had too found this isolated patch. Researchers have fought the spread through a number of techniques including inoculating the fungus with a virus which counters the blight. This technique was original developed in Italy where the European chestnuts are susceptible to blight, but not nearly to the extent as the American variety. Another technique is to pack the cankers with mud as the microbes in the soil

also fight the fungus. Despite the efforts, a number of the trees in this stand are either dead or dying.

A long time chestnut expert has remarked that Trigg County has the most surviving American chestnuts of any county searched. Sites include a number of chestnuts stumps overlooking Kentucky Lake, probably cut in the 1930's or 1940's when the original bight wave was sweeping the Commonwealth. As of 2002, a large and healthy American chestnut was found growing on a very steep bluff overlooking Kentucky Lake. At that time, it measured around 45 feet in height with a "dbh," diameter at breast height, of 11 inches. The tree is particularly exceptional because it only shows one scar from a blight canker, but it is completely healed. Perhaps the tree has just not been exposed to a particularly virulent strain of the fungus, but that is unlikely due to a number of nearby chestnuts that show obvious signs of stem death from blight. The tree has produced large amounts of chestnuts, but recovery of the nuts is difficult due to its location on a step bank facing northwest. The bank is continually pounded with the winds that roll off the lake.

The most remarkable living tree in Kentucky, and perhaps the entire country, is located just outside of Columbia in Adair County. The tree today is estimated to be over 80 years old which means it was living when or immediately after the initial blight hit. The tree is more than 40 inches in diameter and more than 60 feet in height. The rarity in the tree is that it has a number of larger cankers but has recovered and is a healthy tree. The tree was not discovered until 1999 and is located in a fence row between two farms. Not only has the tree survived blight, but it has damage where it was struck by farm equipment. Researchers have called this the "holy grail" of American chestnuts and are hoping the genetic stock from the tree will provide the key to programs attempting to restore this legendary tree. A number of concerned

scientists help pollinate the tree each June and return in the fall to collect nuts for future plantings.

Efforts to Restore the Chestnut.

Despite all of the hopelessness and prior failures to restore the American chestnut to its glory, there is a bright spot. Beginning in 1983, a group was founded dedicated to the restoration of the American chestnut. The American Chestnut Foundation, or T-A-C-F, is remarkably organized and dedicated to the cause. I'm sure the foundation has its fair share of the tree-hugging stereotype, but a much larger part of the group are just people deeply concerned about the restoration of the American chestnut. For some reason, the loss of the Chestnut invokes a passionate response in many people. To those people—its story depicts a loss of innocence in that we, by our on doing, are responsible for the absolute destruction of an icon. In my short relationship with the tree, I do endure a sense of grief when I contemplate how a giant became intangible.

As part of the effort to re-crown the king of the hardwoods, one goal of the Foundation is to identify a wide variety of so-called "mother trees" of American chestnuts that are surviving and flowering. The difficulty is that the few remaining trees are often found isolated from other fruit bearing chestnuts. The chestnut tree is monoecious, meaning that both male and female flowers exist on the same tree. Chestnuts are not self-fertile, so cross-pollination is needed to produce mature nuts. At best, a standalone tree will only produce a sterile seed. Only very rarely have there been documented instances where a disturbance in the forest causes pollination between two or more mature trees. These disturbances occur naturally or due to logging activities, either of which are notorious for stirring up the blight fungus which then quickly kills the existing trees.

The main goal of the Foundation is to utilize a cross-breeding program to develop a substantially American chestnut with blight resistance that is self-sustaining in the native forests. To accomplish this, scientist initially crossed a Chinese chestnut with an American. The Chinese chestnut developed for thousands of years with the blight and thus has developed high level of resistance. So why not just plant Chinese chestnut trees and move on? While the Chinese chestnuts maybe suited for a yard tree, they only grow to a maximum of around 65 feet. The smaller stature, twisting branches, and a broad crown make the orient version incapable of competing in an oak and hickory dominated forest.

In the first generation crossbreeding, offspring of the hybrid trees are selected for both blight resistance and American-like qualities. The process is repeated until at the third-generation of "backcrossing," the trees are 15/16ths American chestnut and 1/16th Chinese. The chief scientist for the foundation explains:

> We diluted out all the traits of the Chinese chestnut except for blight resistance for which we selected at each backcross by inoculating the trees with blight fungus… Whenever we backcrossed to the American chestnut, the trees inherited genes for susceptibility to the blight from the American parent. They also had a chance of inheriting the blight resistant gene from the Chinese side. But when we inter-crossed them to each other, they had a chance of inheriting blight resistance from both parents and eliminating the genes for susceptibility.

The American Chestnut Foundation has recently completed its initial efforts to produce the 15/16th American chestnuts. These trees developed on a 150 acre research farm in Virginia, are presently being planted in test orchards in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. In Kentucky, both pure American chestnuts and blight-resistant backcrosses have been planted on a number of sites, particularly on surface mine reclaimed lands. The reclaimed lands are favored because the soil is generally acidic, the favored condition for chestnut; in addition, the soil may be initially free of the blight fungus which has hindered

previous test plantings. In 2009, volunteers planted 27,500 trees on 36 acres and in 2010 over 115,000 trees were planted on 175 acres. These test sites are all geared toward testing the backcrosses and increasing the amount of available American chestnuts for future plantings. Of interest, the Flight 93 Memorial from the 9-11 crash in Pennsylvania, which is located on a former surface mine, is being utilized as one of the tree planting sites. Although the work is far from complete, there is plenty of encouragement that we will have a blight-resistant, yet American, chestnut tree in the next 10-15 years.

Final Thoughts.

No one knows for sure if the American chestnut will ever rule the hardwood forests of the Eastern United States once again. I think if nothing else by the shear will power of the individuals dedicated to the restoration effort, eventually science will develop a chestnut that is substantially similar to the generations lost, and sufficiently tolerant of the blight. The larger question is whether this variety will ever be coronated once again as the king of the forest. Only time will tell, even if we never live to see the ceremony.

As a final thought, the story of the American chestnut represents something more than the tragic loss of a magnificent tree. It represents the proverb you never know what you have until it's gone. Whether in the ecological sense or with our relationships with others, what are we neglecting to cherish today? Are we so caught up with work and busy lives that we forget to slow down long enough to have a deep conversation? Did we overlook the important things? Have we forgotten something right in front of our eyes, like the person seated across the table from you? Tonight, let's all go home and try to spend a little bit more time like they used to: enjoying life under the shade of a chestnut tree.