

Afterword

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I am often asked how I, as a chemist, became interested in restoring the American chestnut to forests of the Appalachian range where one of every two trees was once an American chestnut. That was before introduction of the chestnut blight fungus from the Orient.

I now know that my best answer is that I was born to it. "What can be done to bring back the 'old-timey' American chestnut" was often a topic of conversation on those long-ago Sunday afternoons when the Peters clan came home to grandpa's.

As a boy growing up, I knew American chestnut was important to the family, but I never appreciated how important until Christmas-time 1990. That was when I discovered Eugene Scott's *Waking 'Em Up* column from the September 17, 1942 *Beckley (WV) Post-Herald*. I found the column in my grandma Nancy Harman Peters' family scrapbook, along with other clippings of importance to her. There it was, with the write-up recognizing grandpa John Kelly Peters' farm as the "Conservation Model."

Fifty years later, I feel the column is worth sharing.

Waking 'Em Up by Eugene Scott

During this period of battles and turmoil in the world, one finds little time to dwell on the past, or to call up those fond memories of experiences that have been lived and all but forgotten . . . Yet, come September, and invariably our minds go back some two decades when, as lads, we used to gather chestnuts from under that hundred or so giant trees along the slopes just back of our home.

Those chestnut trees have been dead for many years and have long since been cut down, but autumn never comes that we do not think often of the glorious days when we arose at dawn to beat the turkeys to the chestnut orchard to gather up the first nuts that had fallen during the night . . . No experience in all the years since has been so colored with sheer delight, with such fantastic enjoyment, as picking up' chestnuts during the month of September.

We had most of the chestnut trees named . . . There was old First, old Second, old Third, named in order as they stood beside the pathway leading to the barn . . . There was old Early, which always started 'crackling' first in the fall.

The chestnut trees were too large to climb . . . Most of them were sixty to seventy-five feet tall and some three to five feet in diameter . . . When the first burrs began to turn brown and to crack open, we would stand on the ground and toss rocks and sticks high into the trees to bring down the first ripening nuts in a spirit of eagerness that could not wait until the burrs burst wide open and the rich, brown nuts pelted down in showers.

Vivid is the recollection at night when we would sleep close to the window and listen to the chestnuts falling through the branches . . . Come dawn and we would attempt to steal out of bed without awaking our brother in an effort to get the first nuts to fall . . . The flock of turkeys, likewise aware the chestnut season had arrived, would often be out before dawn, running from tree to tree to gobble up the nuts that had fallen during the night.

After the burrs had opened wide, the ground would be literally covered with nuts during the early morning . . . And when it chanced to rain during the night, it was not uncommon to find as many as a half-bushel of chestnuts under one tree.

Chestnut season lasted for about three weeks, affording the richest experience of our life as farm lads . . . The first money we can recall earning for ourselves was by picking up chestnuts . . . The nuts used to sell for as much as five to eight dollars a bushel, and the orchard most years would yield fifteen or twenty bushels.

It was a sad day when the giant trees began to blight and to die, limb by limb . . . In the course of two or three years they were all dead, and now only the big stumps remain of the giant chestnut empire over which we used to rule as children.

The years, however, have failed to erase the bright memories of that happy period of boyhood. Even yet, in the midst of pressing duties and the strain of the war, we find our minds drifting back to the past, into that golden age of rich experiences. Sometimes at night, when the katydids are singing their notes of coming autumn, we lie awake musing on the innumerable nights we used to lie beside the window listening to the chestnuts fall . . . We still think that if little boys are to be completely happy in Heaven, there ought to be a lot of chestnut trees there.