

The Last Chestnut Ghost

A story based upon my childhood experiences in western North Carolina

by William B. Wood, MD, Chapel Hill, NC

I was born in February, 1931 in the northwest corner of North Carolina in Surry County. It was close enough to Wilkes County to “smell the corn mash,” and about ten miles below the Virginia line. This is the western-most foothills where the South Fork of the Mitchell River flows out of the hillsides, slopes, and glades and passes within one-hundred feet of our home, nestled in a back cove. It was here that I was privileged to spend ten years of my childhood playing in the cool, swift stream and roaming the pastures and hillsides in a carefree manner that, even now, surprises me. That freedom was my great learning experience. My father was a largely self-taught school teacher and farmer who encouraged observation and the asking of questions. But, surely, the most puzzling and enchanting questions concerned the great grey ghost chestnut trees that stood majestically above the otherwise viable forest, commanding their space in stark contrast to the foliage around them.

There was no doubt these gigantic chestnuts had been the monarchs of the forest. The stories told by my parents, family and friends fostered curiosity, admiration and sadness in me. How could such majestic trees, which provided abundant food for people and animals, provided timber for homes and furniture, and income for poor farmers, disappear? The mystery was intensified by descriptions of the blanket of snowy white blooms covering the mountainside and the happy times spent gathering chestnuts told by my mother and father, grandparents, and others--as much as 10 to 20 bushels in a few days when the chestnuts fell from their lofty heights with the opening of their sharp, spiny burs.

It was an urgent and exciting task to gather as much as possible before feral pigs, black bears and other plentiful forest animals consumed or spoiled them. True, the chestnuts might lie for the winter months protected by their leafy bed, but they might spoil or begin to sprout; so collection, storage and preparation for many food dishes was the order of the day. Parties were organized to lighten the task and spawn competition. To a young boy at the time it seemed all the fun of collecting chestnuts had been missed by “being born too late.”

Even with this disappointment, the deepest sadness was the haunting presence of these great towering chestnut ghosts. There were a few small struggling trees tucked in back coves when I was a child. These finds always produced excited talk about regeneration. Grandfather would, animatedly, revive his vision of re-establishing the great forest giants. However, just as everyone knew they would, these small fugitives from the death sentence were soon found by the chestnut blight and were quickly dispatched.

There was a truly gigantic chestnut ghost several hundred yards beyond our home, standing defiantly near the bottomland field and the bank of the river. It was magnificent even in its barren death—larger than several men could reach to encircle its girth, obviously more in diameter than a tall man, at least seven to eight feet at the butt stump. The height imposed itself over the other tall trees and cast a shadow over the landscape, the last dark image to disappear from the open bottomland as the sun sought refuge beyond the forested mountainside. I often sat in a curious and admiring gaze as I visually traced each limb, now pruned of peripheral branches and foliage. I wondered how it would feel to be grandly sitting there, to see and be seen by all the world. Climbing such a tree would be impossible—much lesser ones were a daunting challenge to an eight-year-old boy—but if I could just fly, I know where I would be!

I know my father admired this old patriarchal tree. I suppose that is the reason he had never felled the tree in the nearly twenty years since its death, even though dozens of others had been harvested for use on the farm and sold for much needed income, for these were the harshest of the Depression years in the

mountains of North Carolina. Farm goods had virtually no market and tobacco sales failed to provide sufficient funds to pay for the fertilizer and the costs of transporting it to Winston-Salem to sell. Our apple orchard was prolific but apples had no market or so little, even at twenty-five cents per bushel, that orchard upkeep could not be maintained. We gave away much more to family and friends than we sold. Therefore, all sources of income had to be pursued. This eventually meant doom for the “Last Great Chestnut Ghost.”

My father, mother and resident Uncle Fred developed a plan for the felling of this huge tree. It would have to be done in several staged encircling cuts to allow the use of the cross-cut saw, the longest of which was a mere six feet. The limited length would give only about one foot of “swing” to the saw stroke. This would add greatly to both the time needed and to the anticipated danger. Multiple assault directions would be used to encircle the massive butt with saw and notched axe cuts. Fortunately there was no tilt or leaning, and the few remaining limbs were about evenly spaced. The determining factor in the “fall” would be placement of the cuts, making higher ones on the far side. The softness of the plowed field would offer some cushioning as it struck the ground--perhaps preventing damaging splits and breaks.

Multiple sized gluts were prepared, long straight poles located, new mauls hewn, two-man crosscut saws sharpened and axes ground on the water wheel until the beveled edges sparkled. All was ready—we would get an early start in the morning, this was no job to rush. The schedule was to have the tree worked up by the first of the next week since it was so dry it would soak up water. Besides, it was the fall of the year and heavy rains might send the South Fork River out of its banks, sweeping the timber away. This great harvest would supplement our very meager farm income. My father had stopped teaching in order to fill in for the extra time needed for farm work—we couldn’t afford hired labor anymore. Maybe he could save the farm and our home from mortgage foreclosure. The bank at Elkin had already had a serious discussion with him, making me as anxious as my parents, though I could not grasp the full impact of foreclosure. I only knew there was increased talk of having to leave my beloved mountainside, creek, pastures and fields where Indian artifacts could be found. It was my whole world. But would it be the same to me and to Dad with this last Chestnut Ghost gone?

My sleep that night was troubled. The excitement about the preparation for the unknown events the next day kept me awake. There was tension reflected in my father and uncle as well as an impending sense of loss. Still, selling chestnut timber for lumber and the promised purchase of split rails at a premium price just might tide us over and save the farm for better times next year—always the farmer’s dream. Sleep finally came. Dawn arrived as my mother gently touched my face and inquired, “Billy, do you want to join your father in felling the tree?”

The fall morning light spilled across the tops of the hillside on the far side of Mitchell South Fork—golden, yet pink with sparkling reflections of moisture on the leaves—not yet cold enough for frost but clear and crisp with dew and fog from the small river. Uncertain at first, I was suddenly wide awake. Dad and my brothers were still eating a hearty breakfast of biscuits with ham and red-eye gravy, and stewed apples and they seemed to be lingering a bit later than they had planned, almost as though there was a reluctance to get on with the task at hand. There may have been an unwillingness to face the potential dangers of such a large challenge, or perhaps it was a hesitation to carry out an act that would change a relationship between a man and his farm? Dad said, “You don’t have to come with us if you don’t want to. It will be a long time before we are ready for the chestnut to fall.” I felt like saying, ‘I hope it will take forever,’ yet I nervously anticipated the big event. Surely, this was the most impressive thing I would ever see...an eight-year-old boy’s sense of time is very truncated.

Bett, the mule, was already fed and ready to be backed between the shaves of the one-horse wagon and the equipment to be loaded. My mother reminded me to stay far out of the way of the tree. I tried to stay

busy gathering expelled chips flung from busy axe blows and small limbs scattered about. This would be another unhappy change; another loss. Even more, the felling of the Chestnut Ghost would now leave another empty place never to be filled again.

The tone of Dad's voice and Uncle Fred's eternal bantering reassured me that this was best for family and farm, maybe our only hope. "Billy, you go with [your brother] Pete to take Bett back to the barn, no need to leave her standing." I could do it by myself but older brothers get the responsible jobs. Brother Tom was assigned to keep the tools in order. Reluctantly, I helped put Bett into the pasture, then ran back to my sentry post. By this time our family friends "Uncle" Zed and Theodore McCann had arrived to keep a neighborly watch, but not necessarily to do any work except to offer "considered" advice.

Was the center of the tree hollow even though it appeared and sounded solid? Each blow made me flinch as though I could feel the strike as the "thunk" echoed off the opposite hillside. No, it did not seem to be hollow and the wind would not be a great problem since there were no leaves to catch the force. Zinging saw strokes, sharp and deep axe blows produced large airborne chips; sweating, heavy breathing effort—with each axe blow a forcefully expelled breath sighed—with each swing, several wide notches cut deeply into the mighty tree. It was much harder cutting into the awkward angle than initially thought and the notch had to be widened several times, slowing the progress considerably.

By mid-morning, Dad and Uncle Fred had the front and both sides hewn away with the side cuts angling up toward the back where a higher final cut would be made. Was there any sign of unstable movement—had any tilt been detected? Prolonged moments of plumb lines held aloft, assisted by distant 'eyeballing' through squinted eyes by otherwise non-helpful neighbors confirmed that the situation remained stable.

"I tell you, folks, seems like you will never get a cut through, not before Christmas," laughed Zed.

Late morning showed the rich, reddish-brown heart had been breached and Dad felt it was time to take a break from what had been an unexpectedly difficult job. So they would see if Mom could provide a little early mid-day dinner and rest, allowing them to finish in early afternoon after some unsupervised planning.

A rest and good food brought agreement on the final act and we returned to the site. With axes and saws re-sharpened the remaining cuts seemed to move more quickly. Gluts and pike poles, though applied generously, never outnumbered the anxious looks and re-sightings to detect the earliest indication of the fall direction. Finally, Zed called out, "She's beginnin' to lean just a mite."

"Whicha' way man,? I want to get my butt out of here when she starts," called back Uncle Fred.

With the observation confirmed, gluts were more forcefully driven and poles set as the saw was paced to more rapid movement. Each man eyed his direction of retreat and with a few more strokes of the saw, a loud "POP" and creaking signaled the fatal loss of balance as a slow, graceful arc of movement became an accelerated "SWOOSH" and a ground-shaking thud as a few limbs hurled back into the air. Without a quiver or final gasp the mighty bulk seemed to blanket the bottomland field—the butt end taller than a man's head. No great cheer of a task accomplished sounded, only shifting looks directed to the mighty Chestnut Ghost, then toward one another, mixtures of lifted anxiety, near disbelief, and a bit of sadness.

Several moments passed with no spoken word. I decided I would go back to the house for a while—just to let Mom know that everything was all right—she would be worried.

We spent several days cutting and splitting the wood into manageable quarters to be hauled for milling into quarter-sawn boards. We also determined what parts could best be used for split-rails. I dreamed of

the rhythm of cross-cutting, the ring of steel against steel followed by mauls driving gluts and the ripping of long straight wood grains pulling apart into rails. Within a week the millable quarters were moved by wagon to trucks, and rails were stacked into accessible ricks to be picked up. Anticipation of a generous financial return assured much income and a sizable mortgage payment--the farm would be saved, at least for another year.

But times were hard in the mountains and foothill towns in the late 1930s. The furniture plant that had contracted for the chestnut lumber went bust and we ended up receiving less than ten percent of the anticipated price.

The builder of the fine house with split-rail fences simply disappeared with the project half finished. We would not be able to sell our wood to him. We could, perhaps, use some of the rails to repair our own fences, but the chestnut lumber was gone into the Great Depression sinkhole which was making itself felt more belatedly and severely in the mountains than in some other regions. The last Chestnut Ghost had made its final and futile gift in vain. We would not be able to save the farm.

Characteristic of families that depended on the land and weather, my father labored on the farm for another year with a temporary reprieve from the bank. One of the bank officials accepted a large quantity of split rails as payment as well as expectations of a better price for tobacco and apples next year. Our struggle was made worse by the death of our elderly mule. Bett was the younger mule but could not carry the full load of the farm work and there was no money to purchase a replacement for Joe. That following year we left our mountain home and the South Fork of the Mitchell River behind and moved to the Piedmont area. We began a new life but my heart and my love remained in that mountain valley, with the sweet freedom of the pastures and orchards, and the swift stream and hillsides.

Only one big question remained: Have I manifested even a small part of the strength and generosity and sacrifice of that 'Last Great Chestnut Ghost?'

From the true life experiences of the family of "Professor" Posey Day Wood, a sometimes teacher and farmer and full-time father and husband, as recalled and lovingly recounted by William Bainster Wood, Sr., M.D., Chapel Hill, N.C.

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