

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY)

2008-02-09

Section: Inside

Out

Edition: Final

Page: C3

Writers revere, remember chestnuts

Mighty Giants: An American Chestnut Anthology Chris Bolgiano, editor; Glenn Novak, contributing editor. Foreword by Bill McKibben. The American Chestnut Foundation and Images from the Past. 286 pp. \$24.95. As part of the national Lincoln Bicentennial celebration, several American chestnut trees were planted in November at the Lincoln Birthplace Memorial near Hodgenville.

Young Abe was known for his ax-wielding skills as a rail splitter, and the chestnut was known as a source of decay-resistant wood for posts, fencing and log homes. **Mighty Giants** brings some of that history to light by compiling a series of essays and illustrations to achieve an easy balance of poignancy and fact.

The American Chestnut Foundation (www.acf.org) is dedicated to remembering and restoring the American Chestnut, *Castanea dentata*, to its native landscape. It once was the dominant hardwood tree in eastern forests, but a fungal blight in the early 1900s killed more than four billion trees, creating a shift in the economy and ecology of many Appalachian communities.

Through cross-breeding programs and biological control of the fungus, researchers are making headway in developing resistance to the disease, giving hope to the idea that the American chestnut can be restored. Research by members of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture's Forestry Department involves chestnut plantings as part of strip-mine reclamation projects.

Kentuckians' contributions to this anthology include poetry from Wendell Berry and excerpts from Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Prodigal Summer*. Most compelling, though, are the personal histories. Demarron Leif Meadows writes, "I recall my great-uncle's homemade banjo, made with chestnut and a groundhog hide." Forrest Stafford of Liberty writes about gathering chestnut burs as a child: "Burs were very unforgiving, and a porcupine didn't have anything on the chestnut bur when it came to pricks."

Historical photos of the massive trees most always include a person standing by the tree trunk, so small as to be surprising when spotted. Creating a new perspective, and seeing that these **mighty giants** have fallen and could use help in rising again, is what this book is all about.

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