

## Money doesn't grow on Chestnut trees anymore

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— Life in the early 1900s in the Appalachian Mountains depended on one crop for food, money, furniture and feed for livestock — the American chestnut tree.

“It didn't cost a cent to raise chestnuts, and there was always food on the table,” Don Davis told members of the Whitfield-Murray Historical Society on Sunday.

But a blight changed the way of life for mountaineers in the 1940s.

People hoped the American chestnut would come back, but after 60 years, the trees — sometimes called Eastern redwoods because of their large stature — still can't withstand the affects of the blight, said Davis, professor of sociology at Dalton State College and the founding president of the Georgia Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation.

About one in a billion American chestnut trees can survive the fungus, Davis said. One of those stands in Walker County in an area called Chestnut Flats, named so for the high number of trees that once populated the area, he said. The area is rare because most American chestnuts grew above 1,500 feet elevation.

Trees are being crossed with the Chinese chestnut, which is blight-resistant, to be reintroduced into the wild.

Some trees grew up to 17 feet in diameter and up to 10 bushels of chestnuts could be gathered from one tree, Davis said.

Hogs were allowed to run loose in the woods to eat chestnuts that had fallen so they would be fat for slaughter.

“Hog raising was remarkably high in the mountains,” Davis said. “Chestnuts made the pork taste better. Mountain pork sold for much higher.”

People took chestnuts to town to sell. Sometimes school children would trade handfuls of the nuts for supplies, such as pencils and paper. Furniture, fence posts and homes were made from the tree, which was resistant to many insects and didn't rot, according to Davis.

He said one man told him “the worst thing that ever happened in this country was the death of the American chestnut.”

Deborah Pritchett, a member of the historical society, remembers her father Fred, who grew up in north Murray County, speaking nostalgically about gathering chestnuts.

“People here really lost something,” she said. “I had heard them talk about picking up chestnuts, but I didn't realize how much it meant to them until I saw pictures and saw how huge they were. They were like the California redwoods. An entire region lost their crash crop. You can imagine the poverty in this area anyway.”