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Rare Tree Has Roots in Cameron

POSTED: August 31, 2008

By ART LIMANN

Staff Writer

CAMERON -While sitting in the woods one day in 1999, James Robinson of Cameron looked over and saw a tree he did not recognize. Curious, he sent samples of the leaves to West Virginia University for analysis. There it was determined the tree was a rare American Chestnut tree.

The tree still stands on Robinson's land, appears healthy and continues to grow. In November 2007, tree experts from WVU came to look at the tree and confirm the find. Among them was William MacDonald, professor of plant and soil sciences, who said, "It's real unusual."

MacDonald, visiting in Marshall County recently, said the American Chestnut is found

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more often in other parts of the state particularly in the eastern mountains. Those don't generally get to be the size of the one on Robinson's property. It is the only such tree he knows of in Marshall County, however, he admits he doesn't look for them and there may be others.

How the tree got there can only be speculated, possibly a bird carrying the seed.

"This tree is a lot older than it looks," MacDonald explained. "It could be 30 to 40 years old but is being suppressed by the other trees around it. It hasn't had the opportunity to grow. It's a pretty unique individual."

It has about an 8-inch trunk and is about 40 feet tall. If trees around it were cut, it would grow more quickly.

MacDonald also explained it is unable to reproduce without another like tree in the area. "It may produce burrs, but they won't germinate," he said. "This one has survived. It has no infections."

Once prevalent along the east coast and as far west as Indiana, American Chestnut trees are now difficult to find after being nearly being wiped out, by the 1950s, from a tree fungus introduced from Asia. They can grow 80 to 100 feet tall and in excess of six feet in diameter.

Prior to the 1900s, the trees were popular for building homes and barns because the wood was lightweight, easy to work with, and could grow branch-free for up to 50 feet. Wood from the trees was also used for furniture, fence posts, musical instruments and more. In addition, the nut itself was eaten by people and animals.

WVU and other researchers have developed treatments for the blight and are trying to preserve the American Chestnut. Robinson, 85, said he's heard stories of other American Chestnut trees being "up on the ridge" above the tree he found, at one time, but has never found evidence of them. "I don't know where they went," he said.

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