

Vermont Public Radio - vpr.net

<http://www.vpr.net/episode/43704/>

[Programs Commentary Series \(VPR\)](#)

Commentary Series (VPR)

7:55am and 5:55pm Weekdays

Thursday May 29, 2008

American Chestnut

[Tom Slayton](#)

(HOST) Commentator Tom Slayton is a veteran journalist and editor-emeritus of Vermont Life magazine, who's been reading a new book about the demise - and possible resurrection - of the American Chestnut tree.

(SLAYTON) Disasters are not always loud, crashing events. Sometimes a disaster can be silent, even stealthy, and can take years to happen.

That was the case with one of the greatest natural cataclysms ever to occur in North America: the virtual extinction of one of the great trees of our forest, the American chestnut.

A blight, specifically a fungus accidentally imported from China, began killing chestnuts in the late 19th century. By 1904, it had been discovered in trees around New York City, and the alarm was raised; but nothing could be done, and by the late 1930s something like 85 per cent of the chestnut trees in America's forests were dead or dying.

It was a tragedy of monumental proportions. Not only was the American Chestnut a useful tree of enormous economic value, it was a beautiful, noble tree, beloved by all who knew the forest. Mature chestnuts could grow to immense size. Some stood 120 feet tall with a trunk diameter of 12 or 14 feet. Photographs of such trees often include human beings as tiny inconsequential figures, dwarfed in the shade of the immense tree beside them. The nuts of the chestnut were sweet and nutritious, an important food source for 19th century Americans and for their animals.

Chestnuts provided wood for houses - beams and rafters and roof timbers, as well as furniture, musical instruments, and common everyday utensils. Abraham Lincoln split chestnut rails. Henry David Thoreau and Henry Ward Beecher wrote in praise of the tree. Wendell Berry, Robert Frost, and others wrote poems about it. It had grown into the

American soul.

Then came the blight, and the native American chestnut was all but wiped out across America. Within a generation, the tree had been mourned and almost forgotten. Attempts were made to find biological controls to reverse the effects of the blight, but nothing worked completely.

Then, in 1983, a group of biologists, tree-fanciers, and their friends formed the American Chestnut Foundation. Though the government had given up on attempts to breed a disease-resistant American Chestnut, the members of the Foundation had not. It took years, but now more than 17,000 disease-resistant trees are being nurtured on chestnut research farms in Virginia.

You can read about the Foundation's efforts and the chestnut itself in a handsomely illustrated new book, entitled *Mighty Giants*, recently published by the Bennington publishing company, Images from the Past. It's a fascinating book about a heroic and little-known struggle.

There are still American chestnut trees scattered thinly around Vermont. Near my Montpelier home there's a Chestnut Hill and a Chestnut Street, and there are said to be chestnut trees in both those places.

Perhaps through the efforts of the American Chestnut Foundation, more such place names will be cropping up. The restoration of the American chestnut is a dream worth dreaming, about as good a thing as human beings can do with their time on this earth.