

WHEN MONEY GREW ON TREES

the ballad of the American chestnut

by Lucille Griffin

for Matthew, Ben, Eli, Nathan, Harry & Luke

In the 19th century, before chestnut blight had reached America, in the forests and surrounding foothills of southern Appalachia, one fourth of the trees were American chestnuts. "In many areas, chestnut was the dominant tree, often occurring in almost pure stands." --E. Lucy Braun 1

*I remember when Grandpa was still a young man,
High up on his tractor with me on his lap,
And I did the steering while he told the stories:*

Once upon a time there was another boy like you.
He helped his pa work on the farm when anything a boy asked for
Was right here at the home place or down to the country store;
When every day's adventure was the real thing, not TV,
The mountain woods were free for all, and money grew on trees.

*Around and around we would stir up the field,
Like the big wooden spoon that circles her kettle,
When Grandma makes apple spread, thick, sweet, and spicy.*

We didn't have a tractor then, but Jackson did the job.
That boy like you squeezed Jackson's neck between his knees,
Leaned up against his wiry mane and relayed orders from General Lee:
Don't stand there like a stone wall, Gee! and make those Yankees run!
The chickens retreated before his charge, and that day's battle was won.

*My favorite tale was about his first rifle,
The one Uncle got in the war,
And gave to Grandpa for a secret.*

He hid that Mauser in a hollow tree, just five minutes' run from school,
And the older boys, trading bullets for turns, soon taught him how to shoot
Tin cans off a log so far away, you could hardly hear the hit.
This boy was bigger than you are now, but sometimes not so smart.
He wished for a target loud and clear to better show off his art.

Way before the teacher got there, before the earliest bird,
The school bell tolled, BONG! bong-bong, so everybody heard.
And all but one picked up the pace for fear of being tardy.
That outlaw bell-ringer struck again, every time he dared,
Until the joke was turned on him, when his rifle disappeared.

*The engine hum carried his holiday voice
Over hills and through valleys of hay,
Uncovering clues on the way to the treasure:*

Here is where your great-grandma's garden used to be,
All kinds of beans and peppers and greens, carrots, onions and peas,
'Taters, tomatoes, pumpkins and squash running on up the hill,
And corn, those finger-sized baby ears, tender, crisp and sweet.
Lost in the corn patch, a boy could find lots more than he could eat.

Mercy! said Grandma, must be raccoons eating up my corn.
Another dog might earn his keep watching the garden and yard.
That 's how the boy got Mosby, a fine all-purpose guard.
He could hunt chipmunk, woodchuck and skunk, raccoon, rabbit and bear.
Through field and thicket, day or night, he'd track them to their lair

A pardner for wrestling, rambling or dreaming, Mosby was the best!
His tail wagged in circles whenever he ran and beat the drums when he sat.
His coat was fuzzy behind the ears, all spotted white, brown, and black.
With big sad eyes he'd wait his turn for dinner or for fun.
His ears went up when you said his name and he always came on the run.

When the enemy was rabbits, Mosby barked and circulated,
Working closer to the ambush where the steady aim that waited
Surely would have won the war, but the army had no weapon, so,
The rabbits slipped away till they heard from General Lee,
That a boy might buy a shotgun with money grown on trees.

*Of course, Mom had taught me it doesn't grow there,
But respect for my Grandpa held back the idea,
Till one day I asked him the question.*

Now, of course, your mother's right, but once upon a time,
We had a world of chestnuts, higher than you could climb. 2
Their summer blooms, like foaming waves rolled down the mountainsides,
And the nuts they gave us every fall were just as good as gold:
The country store took them in trade for everything that's sold.

Late in September before school opened, farming and housework stopped,
While everyone gathered chestnuts, the mountain money crop.
The ground was cleared in the forest groves where they fell like a heavy rain.
You could rake them into flour sacks, take them to the store,
Weigh them in for due bills, hurry back for more.

This boy sat up on Jackson's back with a big sack of chestnuts tied
Right across the saddle, for many a downhill ride.
Like Stuart riding 'round Richmond, the Lone Ranger up on Silver,
Daniel Boone with a big black bear, his dreams grew brighter and larger;
He was Jason with the golden fleece, Sir Lancelot on his charger.

Mr. McDaniels kept the store and wrote out the receipts,
And took the due bills back in trade for things we'd need and treats.
For a boy and his little sister, Grandma and General Lee:
White flour, sugar and coffee, enough to last the year,

New shoes, trousers and books for school, long-handled underwear.

And for the boy who'd learned to work as hard as he could dream,
The best all-purpose shotgun sold, known as the Long Range Wonder.
It could stop the rabbits in their tracks with a shot as loud as thunder,
And was just as good for hunting Mosby's other enemies.
It all was bought and paid for with money grown on trees.

*Then I wondered aloud whether that was the gun
That leaned by the chimney in Grandma's front parlor
And when Grandpa'd teach me to shoot it.*

No, that's not a shotgun, Son; that's the same old Mauser rifle.
When Uncle was courting the teacher, he was just one more suitor,
Until he proved that he loved her best by stopping the school bell shooter.
Several years later they were married, moved over yonder by the river,
And sent the boy a long package signed, from Uncle Indian-giver.

*When I walk through the meadows where we used to ride,
My grandfather's rifle is here by my side.
We go up in the high hills, a hunting for chestnuts.*

*Where they once ruled the hillsides, I find the new shoots,
That keep springing up from their deep-seated roots;
Then I clear out the briars to set free the best ones.*

*In the north-facing cove behind Shooting Creek Falls,
I've discovered a chestnut near sixty feet tall.
It makes blossoms in summer, but never makes chestnuts. 3*

*As I shoot down the scionwood, to make some new trees 4
That will grow up like this one, my shots stir a breeze
Of old memories echoing down through the clearcuts:*

Once upon a time there was another boy like you.
He helped his pa work on the farm when everything a boy asked for
Was right here at the home place, or down to the country store;
When every day's adventure was the real thing, not TV,
The mountain woods were free for all...., and money grew on trees.

NOTES

1 Deciduous Forests of Eastern North America. Dr. E. Lucy Braun. The Blackiston Company, Philadelphia. 1950.

2 Noel Weaver, "Up there was a world of chestnuts." In Patrick County Project, Oral History Collection, Virginia Tech Library, in which the local economics of this chestnut story was gathered.

3 The American chestnut tree has both male and female flowers, but it is not self-fertile. To
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make chestnuts, there must be at least two mature trees growing no farther than 200 feet apart for efficient cross-pollination. Handbook of North American Nut Trees Dr. Richard A. Jaynes, editor. The North American Nut Growers Association 1969.

4 Scionwood is (about) the last 6 inches of new wood from the previous year's growth. It is collected January to March and kept in the refrigerator until grafts can be executed: each bud can make a tree identical to the one from which the scion was collected. Old-timers believed the best scionwood grew in the tops of trees. Thus, the volunteers collecting scions for the original USDA-FS program (discontinued in the 50's) often were sharpshooters. From the files of Dr. Jesse D. Diller, coordinator of USDA 4600-NE-2301-1, known as the "American Chestnut Cooperators".