

## Chestnut at Perkey Tree Farm Arlyn Perkey

In November of 2008, I was clearing a path for a road on my tree farm, when I encountered a long-dead, faded gray, tipped over tree. When the chainsaw sliced through the wood to sever the root wad, I noticed that, relative to other tree cuts, the saw went through like it was cutting butter. Also apparent was an odd, unfamiliar smell. I stopped cutting.

That evening, I emailed Steve Chandler, a fellow retired Forest Service employee and described the incident. Steve responded, "If it smelled like camphor, it's a chestnut". Further investigation confirmed what Steve and I had suspected. I had discovered the remains of an American chestnut that had been growing on what is now the Perkey Tree Farm near Daybrook in western Monongalia County, WV. This area had suffered the 1930s ecological disaster that wiped out chestnuts across the Eastern US.

American chestnut wood is very decay resistant, especially if it is held off the ground. My tipped over tree had been supported by its top branches and its vertical, uprooted stump. The underlying soil had eroded away, thereby delaying deterioration of the small log and root wad. I set off to salvage this remnant of the once magnificent forest landscape.

Fortunately, the tree was accessible by my 4-wheel drive pickup, and I maneuvered the 8 foot log and stump into its bed. Later, when I cut the stump from the log, I decided to calculate the tree's age. Given the blight of the 1930s, I guesstimated 1934 as the approximate date of the tree's demise. Based on the 30 annual growth rings on the stump, it's like the tree's year of origin was 1904. So when I came across the tree stump in 2008, it was over 100 years old. Ironically, 1904 is about the same year that the exotic, invasive chestnut blight (*Cryphonectria parasitica*) was accidentally introduced into North America.

On June 16, 2009, SWPWO member John Burnham fired up his portable saw mill and sawed the salvaged log and stump into boards and cookies.





Slicing cookies from American Chestnut stump. Wooden blocks were used to hold the stump steady during the sawing process.

On January 28, 2022, DCW Hardwoods and Slabs of Little River, SC finished one of the cookies. The smooth Epoxy finish clarified the counting of 30 annual rings to age the well preserved relic of the past.



My son David Perkey joined the cause of championing Chestnut, crafting this clock from another of the stump's cookies. Marking the 3,6,9, and 12 o'clock spots on the clock face are buttons made of walnut. The buttons representing the other clock numbers are black cherry.



Interestingly, the path I was cleaning when I found this old chestnut specimen was part of my plan to gain access to the best chestnut planting sites on the property. From 2009 to 2012, I obtained Backcross 1 (BC1) chestnuts from Bob and Ann Leffel of York, PA. These pre-germinated seeds were planted at suitable locations, including the vicinity of where I had happened upon the relic American chestnut. BC1 Chestnuts average about 75% American and 25% Chinese characteristics. Some of the trees may have some degree of resistance to the blight. There is hope that the 30-year old relic we salvaged will someday be replaced with a suitable version of a modern day American chestnut tree. In the meantime, some of these mostly male sterile BC1 chestnuts may serve as a reminder of the need to restore this American icon.



In the meantime, a piece of Perkey Tree Farm's American chestnut heritage is now being remembered and enjoyed in the comfort of David and Candice's home.