

BY MARK LUZIO

## American Chestnut

*"A grove of chestnut trees is a better provider than a man—easier to have around, too." —Appalachian woman's oral history*

**Working in New England** for over 40 years, I have dismantled and restored several houses that were around 250 years old. A necessary part of this work was demolition, which entailed my peeling though layers that were 100, 150, and 200 years old before getting to the original house. It's nasty work but comes with some reward when you discover small historical artifacts, however insignificant—a bit of old newspaper, a broken tool left in a wall, a coin or clay pipe, or even wood shavings that are the tell-tale sign of carpenters who once worked exclusively with hand tools. But for me, the best reward has been old wood I have been able to salvage, and some of the best of this has been American chestnut.

Once a common wood found in most East Coast and Appalachian houses and barns built before 1930, American chestnut is now rare because of a fungus that reached America from imported trees. The Bronx Botanical Garden was the first to report blisters that girdled the bark and killed trees at the Bronx Zoo in 1904. Over the next 40 years, from New England to the Carolinas, 4 billion trees were lost—fully 25% of the entire Eastern forest. As the American Chestnut Foundation put it: "The American chestnut tree survived all adversaries for 40 million years, then disappeared within 40."

Chestnut trees have been described as the redwoods of the East; some were the largest trees in the forest, growing to 5 or 6 feet in diameter, and some odd giants even measured up to 10 feet in diameter. The chestnut used to be a staple food for people and animals, and an important cash crop in the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky Mountains, until the tree disappeared at a most inopportune time, during the Great Depression. All rural people would have known this tree. Native Americans used its leaves and bark for medicinal tinctures. The high tannin content of the bark made it a cash crop to sell to leather tanneries.

Chestnut has a color and grain close to white oak but has the weight of pine. A good test to distinguish it from oak is to try scratching it with a fingernail; if it leaves a mark, it is probably chestnut. The wood was used in every part of a house or barn. It has strong natural resistance to rot, so it was often selected for sills and posts. It is light but strong, so it was also used for beams and especially rafters. But because it was so common and plentiful, it was used virtually everywhere else: as sheathing, interior wall panels, floorboards, and trim; it was even planed to 1/2-inch-thick dust boards between cupboard drawers and

rough sawn for lath. To quote a bit of Appalachian oral history: "I've seen it used for a cradle and a coffin."

I once found chestnut floorboards in the attic of a house I restored that had been built circa 1760. The width and tightly spaced growth rings put the age of the trees (likely cut within a mile of the house) at about 200 years, so they were probably saplings around 1560. Many years later, cutting joints on the last board from that attic, I thought, what a survivor—461 years now and hopefully another 100 or more in its new service life. While commissioned cabinet pieces make up most of my work now and I haven't done much demolition in the past few years, I still come across chestnut boards at architectural salvage yards. I look for boards with straight grain and widely spaced nail holes, looking to make the largest possible clear cuts. The thin strips are good for banding and picture frames, and the wider pieces for dovetailed boxes and drawers. Each little project becomes my respectful meditation on a once great tree.

*Mark Luzio owns Post Pattern Woodworking, based in Brooklyn, Conn.*



A dovetailed box made by the author from salvaged chestnut wood. The pull is inset with a 1902 half dollar from a time just before the blight.

Photo: Mark Luzio