

West Virginia's First Chestnut Festival  
Sunday, October 12, 2008 in Rowlesburg, West Virginia

**“A Smashing Success”**

submitted by N. Joseph Nassif, Main Chair, RRC Chestnut Festival Task Force

***How and Why** did Rowlesburg have the honor to host the State's first chestnut festival? To quote Shirley Cook Hartley, “It began four years ago when Joe and the members of the **Rowlesburg Revitalization Committee (RRC)**, discussed the idea of hosting a Chestnut Festival. This hoped for dream has come true and it has added to Rowlesburg's cultural heritage and to the State's heritage. “*

The credit for the excellent success for this Inaugural event was due to two years of planning, dedication and hard work of members of RRC, together with the Sesquicentennial Committee's chair, Kathleen Wolfe. A listing of the four Festival events held on October 12 are as follows: **(1) Rowlesburg Park Festivities, noon-5 p.m.; (2) Inaugural planting of an hybrid American Chestnut Tree, 4 p.m.; (3) Sit-down banquet dinner, 5 p.m.; (4) Karaoke in-the-Park, 7:30 p.m.**

Two major hurdles to overcome for the planned Festival were having **bona fide vendors** and **prominent speakers**. We were successful on both parts. The speakers and distinguished guests present were: (1) **Dr. William MacDonald** and Mark Double, plant pathologists, WVU; (2) Robert Strasser, Chestnut Restoration Biologist, Hood College; (3) Professor Charles “Rick” Sypolt, Biologist, Glenville State College; (4) Kathy Marmet, VP for Education, and Deborah Fialka, Secretary, Virginia Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF); (5) Michelle Figaretti, Representative for Governor Manchin; (6) Sandy Burk, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Services, Shepherdstown, WV.

**Park Activities.** Crowds of spectators were constantly mingling in the **Park** with the 12 various Vendors who had either interesting displays or chestnut items to sell. First, everyone was standing in line to sample or purchase the delicious roasted chestnuts-on-the-grill. Chestnuts-in-Honey (in jars) for sale were also a big hit, provided by The **Bee Box's** John and Martha Slawter. Some attendees came to purchase Chestnut saplings. More than 50 saplings were sold (funds donated to RRC) by Lynn and Rhonda Jennings. Chestnut furniture and items were on display and some for sale by various vendors, Charlie Wotring, Jasper Sanders and Sam Sanders.

The well-known **Treenware Company** was represented by Stan and Sue Jennings, and their wares for sale included **collector items** made of wormy chestnut. Kathy Marmet, Deborah Fialka, and Robert Strasser manned display booths of **The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF)**. Besides selling signature items they answered questions pertaining to the heritage of the American Chestnut Tree. For the children, Rob Morrell's booth, “**Throwing Chestnuts-in-the-Well,**” was exciting and a big hit with the children, as each child was presented with a prize. The Park Commission and especially Commissioner James Wagner are to be complimented for their untiring efforts, including the set-up of the chestnut grill area, tables for vendor display, tents, and bleachers.

**Former Rowlesburg School.** Many attendees visited the Rowlesburg Middle School Student **Composition and Drawing Contest**, which was displayed in the former Rowlesburg School building. The theme was, "Era of the American Chestnut Tree." The middle school sponsors were science teacher James Davis and Jennifer Loughry. Four contestant winners were announced at the 4 p.m. ceremony and cash prizes were awarded. Also on exhibit across the school hallway were the world renown 10 model-to-scale railroad bridges on loan from the B & O Museum in Baltimore, last exhibited during the 1927 World's Fair of the Iron Horse." The perfect fall weather was especially enjoyed by those taking the Historical Society's trips to **Cannon Hill** for breathtaking views, as Mother nature exhibited her talent with autumn glory colors of fall.

**Tree Planting.** The Inaugural planting of a 5<sup>th</sup> generation hybrid American Chestnut Tree by Robert Strasser and Lynn Jennings, near the old Rowlesburg School, was extremely well attended. We owe thanks to Robert Strasser and to Dr. Hill Craddock, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga for donating the two hybrid trees. One of the highlights was the performance of the Preston High Madrigal Singers, directed by Deborah Westbrook, especially for the inspirational song, "O Chestnut Tree," sung eloquently to the tune of "O Tannenbaum." Michelle Figaretti spoke of behalf of Governor Manchin who was unable to attend. Kathy Marmet and Deborah Fialka also gave speeches on the background of the American Chestnut Tree.

**Sit-down Banquet Dinner.** The banquet dinner in the VFW building, featuring Chestnut flavored dishes, was enjoyed by all in attendance. Shirley did a superb job in arranging the dinner menu with Monroe Restaurant's chef, Jim Maier. Unfortunately, many were turned away as the banquet was sold out. There were many highlights of the evening, including the crowning ceremonies of "**Mr. and Mrs. Chestnut**" (Walter and Betty Snider Shaver). The magnificent crowns themselves were embellished with gold-sprayed chestnuts. Following, there was a drawing for the winner of an imposing **four-foot tall eagle**, carved in chestnut wood by Walter Shaver. The winners were Hugh and Helen Mae Felton. The evening also included a spontaneous auction, of a **ceramic chestnut leaf bowl**, designed by Robert Strasser. Ron Brown, as an inspired auctioneer, was able to obtain a spirited bid of \$400 from Tom Brown, which was subsequently donated back to RRC. The three after dinner speakers, the distinguished **Dr. William MacDonald**, Robert Strasser, and a DVD presentation by Thomas H. Nassif, were well received, and a fitting end to the banquet festivities.

**Channel 12 TV-WBOY**, Clarksburg, videotaped part of the Park Festivities and it appeared on the same day evening news. Among others, Cynthia McCloud, news reporter from Charleston attended the all-day event. Cynthia reports that an article will be forthcoming in the **Corridor Trade Magazine**, published in Charleston.

**Summary.** The **success of the Chestnut Festival** could be summed up by **quotes** from three of our distinguished guests. **Dr. William MacDonald** in a letter stated, *“The Chestnut Festival was a grand affair and I was very impressed by your accomplishments. **Positive things happen in our state** when great people and their communities take charge like you all did. Your Festival helped provide impetus for a West Virginia Chapter of TACF and I hope that you are planning a Chestnut Festival for next year. Perhaps the WV Chapter and/or my students could be involved in your Festival.”* **Kathy Marmet** sent the following e-mail, *“Deborah Fialka and I thoroughly enjoyed the Festival experience, from a Belgian waffle breakfast... to the very moving young voices of high school madrigal singers ... to the older residents and their stories of the Chestnut blight...to the sweetness of their story telling... to the middle school student exhibits... to the magnificent banquet dinner... to the informative educational Chestnut DVD film created by Thomas H. Nassif. **Rowlesburg is truly in the heart of the home of the by-gone American Chestnut Tree!**”*

**Robert Strasser** telephoned us after the Festival and remarked, *“The event was a huge success. You attracted not only a depth of experts, but also a diverse community of people from all walks. I enjoyed the many anecdotal stories told to me including the story related by Walter Shaver, who to escape the rain while walking to school, hid with his sister in a large cut-out of an American Chestnut Tree not yet felled by an ax. **The Rowlesburg Festival is truly an integral part of a larger story of our great American Heritage.** I encourage you and RRC to make this an annual Festival as it brings together a diversified group of individuals not only those dedicated aficionados, but those who keenly want to become a part of the heritage of the Great American Chestnut Tree, “The Redwood of the East.”*