

A Smashing Success: West Virginia's 4th Chestnut Festival

Submitted by N. Joseph Nassif, DDS, Director, and Shirley Cook Hartley, Co-chairperson, RRC Chestnut Festival Task Force

The cool, fall weather in Rowlesburg on Sunday, October 9, 2011, was picture perfect, with a brilliant sun, a cloudless, cobalt blue sky, and with the surrounding hills being alive with tree leaves reflecting the glory colors of autumn. What could have been better than such a glorious day to celebrate West Virginia's 4th Annual Chestnut Festival, which was bigger and better than ever!

The Sunday Festivities began in the Szilagyi Center (old Rowlesburg High School) across from the Park, where a **free continental breakfast** was held amongst an energetic and mingling crowd, lining up for a book and article signing by renowned American Chestnut researcher, **Dr. James Hill Craddock** from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Dr. Craddock, never lost for words, had many entertaining stories to tell about the world of chestnuts.

The theme of the Chestnut Festival, "Exploring our roots," was designed to honor the tremendous efforts that are being made on restoring the great American chestnut tree to its former Appalachian hills. One hundred years ago, the American chestnut was the most abundant tree in Eastern forests of the U.S. from Maine to Georgia. It was used by people as food, feed for livestock, building material, furniture, and fuel.

Throughout the day, the **Rowlesburg Park** was flourishing with **people oriented activities**, including sampling and tasting "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire....," vendors selling many items made of wormy chestnut wood, and Allegheny Treenware chestnut collectibles, purchasing jarred honey with chestnuts, and children fun activities, such as "throwing chestnuts-in-the-well." Spectators were fascinated to observe the functioning of a chestnut peeling machine, invented by Jerald Whitmer, from Shenandoah Junction, WV. Contact Mr. Whitmer for further information on his peeling machine. Finally, there were various chestnut saplings available for purchase to plant in your own back yard.

Across the street in the **Szilagyi Creative Arts Center**, **afternoon activities** included multiple standard exhibits, such as, The World War II Museum, and the B & O historic bridge exhibit. For those wanting a better understanding of current American Chestnut activities, there were scientific research presentations by **Dr. Don Kines**, President, Mountain State Chestnut Company, and by **Bryan Burhans, President and CEO of The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF)**, from Asheville, NC. Many spectators also attended the The West Virginia Chapter Meeting of TACF, presided over by President Jimmy Jenkins, and vice, Bryan Perkins, which was open to the public.

The evening wrapped up with a **Gala Banquet Dinner**, 5:30 to 7:30 PM, offering menu items featuring chestnuts flavored dishes. The **keynote speaker** at the Gala Banquet was the renowned American chestnut researcher, educator and writer, **Dr. James Hill Craddock** from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Other dinner entertainment included the Preston

High Madrigal Singers, **the crowning of our chestnut royalty, Mr. and Mrs. Chestnut, Professor Rick and Alice Sypolt**, from Glenville State College. CEO Bryan Burhans made a passionate plea to the audience to get involved in supporting the chestnut research foundation by becoming a member of the West Virginia Chapter of TACF. For more information, go to www.acf.org.

The delightful evening event ended with an **auction**, including hand-made chestnut items. Chestnut souvenir booklets, with chestnut related recipes, articles and stories, were a big hit with the audience. **A big thank you** goes out to those who purchased ads in the souvenir booklet, which allowed us to show a profit for continuing future events.* We would be remiss also for not thanking the members of the members of the **Chestnut Festival Committee**: Kathleen Wolfe, Anna Nassif, Mark Double, Doris Wolfe Rooks, Lee Waybright, George Nassif Mayor Margaret Schollar, Maggie DeWeirdt, Jean Wolfe, Thomas H. Nassif, and to the other tireless working volunteers.

Summary. The **success of the Chestnut Festival** could be summed up in a paraphrase from one of our distinguished guests, **Dr. William MacDonald**. In a letter, Dr. MacDonald stated, *"I would never have imagined such a grand festival honoring the Great American chestnut becoming attached to the Cheat River community of Rowlesburg, and least of all, for Nora and me to have been crowned King and Queen Chestnut at last year's Festival. **Positive things happen in West Virginia** when great people and their communities take charge like you all did. Your Festival helped provide an impetus for a **West Virginia Chapter of TACF** and I hope that you are planning a Chestnut Festival for next year. You and the members of **RRC** have worked tirelessly to promote the American chestnut and to keep the town of Rowlesburg a vibrant community. It is paying off."*

Mark your calendar for **next year's Chestnut Festival, October 7, 2012**, which will include another excellent scientific session planned by Professor Mark Double, and Dr. William MacDonald, West Virginia University, Davis College of Agriculture and Forestry.

For more information, go to www.rowlesburg.info, www.rowlesburg.org, www.wvchestnutfestival.com. Please contact Shirley at shartley812@verizon.net, or telephone 304-329-1240, or Joe at njn3@msn.com with your comments. For information on becoming a member of TACF, go to www.acf.org. Also, we would like to know if you feel the Chestnut Festival should be an Annual Event.

*Special thanks to our Sponsors: WV Community Partnership, WV Fairs & Festivals, Clear Mountain Bank, Greater Morgantown Convention and Visitors Bureau, WV Chapter of TACF, and ON-TRAC Rowlesburg.