

Ghosts haunt the farm

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The oldest human object I own is a nondescript arrowhead, called a “point.” A Native American -- probably one of the Adena people -- fashioned it from gray chert, a variety of quartz, that may have been quarried a few miles from our farm 600 to 1,000 years ago.

It’s not well-made, and it’s worth no more than a couple of bucks. Some points are art—gorgeous, translucent stones that are exquisitely crafted. Mine was not made to be shown off or bartered. It was flaked quickly and finished just enough to get the job done.

I am always startled to realize that less than 600 years ago, my predecessors in land title were living in the Stone Age in my front yard.

What remains? Their points, mostly. Yet, every once in a while, I get a low-level sense when I’m out in the woods that I’m being observed. I would be surprised but not exactly shocked to have a Native American from the 13th Century step out from behind a big hickory with an arrow notched in his bow.

What would I say?—“How. Me come in peace. Have a granola bar.”

I hate being so stupid even with ghosts cooked up in my own imagination.

Around the country, you can find their pre-Columbian pottery, artifacts, burial mounds, petroglyphs, village sites and campfire charcoal. These people also left descendants, but none as far as I know remain around here.

When I hold this utilitarian arrowhead, I know that another human hand fashioned it and used it centuries ago. It might have killed deer or an enemy. It survived its maker and will survive me. I figure that it’s living with us in retirement.

The name, “Killbuck,” is remembered here, 250 years after he left his mark. He was a Lenape (Delaware) chief and medicine man who fought white settlers in the 1750s and 1760s in northwestern Virginia and northern West Virginia. He was known to whites as John Killbuck Sr.; to the tribes as Bemino.

Leading a war party of Shawnees in 1758, he won several battles, killed prisoners and took captives back to Ohio.

Today, whites reenact the Fort Seybert massacre in neighboring Pendleton County, W.Va., where families of some of his victims remain. George Washington ordered this fort built in 1857, and reenactors burn a facsimile every fall.

One captive, Sarah Dyer Hawes, lived with the Indians near Chillicothe, Ohio for five years until she was rescued by her brother and former fellow captive, James Dyer. Her descendants have a spoon made of buffalo horn that she used during her captivity.

A deceased friend in her late 70s who lived in the area showed me a trail on her land that she said Killbuck had walked and a spring from which he had drunk. She wasn't entirely convinced that she would not die at the end of his tomahawk one night. "Can't really blame him, can we?" she said.

Killbuck and most of the other tribes on the Appalachian frontier lined up against the Americans and British in the French and Indian War (1754-1763), though their allegiances shifted quickly between the 1740s and the 1780s.

Many tribes came to see American settlers as the primary threat to their land and way of life. They tended to side with the British during the American Revolution, because, among other reasons, colonists had ignored the Royal Proclamation of 1763 that prohibited white settlement beyond the East-West drainage divide in the Appalachian Mountains.

By the end of the War of 1812, the Shawnee, Delaware and most of the other tribes had ceased being a military presence from Virginia to the Mississippi. Their resistance ended at the 1813 Battle of the Thames in Ontario when Americans defeated the British and a coalition of tribes under the Shawnee chief, Tecumseh.

Killbuck in his 70s died in 1779 of natural causes in Ohio, a Christian convert who had taken the name, William Henry. His descendants have been accepted into the Daughters of the American Revolution.

As far as I know, I've never seen a descendant of Killbuck, the Delaware or Shawnee around here, though the families of those who ran them off are my neighbors.

When Killbuck was a factor in these mountains and valleys, about 25 percent of the forest that covered some 200 million acres from northern Mississippi to southern Maine was American chestnut. Spared from metal cutting tools, *Castanea dentata* was estimated to have averaged four to five feet in diameter at that time, with some twice that width.

Like the native inhabitants, the American chestnut, too, fell to an invasive species. A fungus -- *Cryphonectria parasitica*, called chestnut

blight -- stowed away on resistant Japanese chestnuts imported into the United States in the late 19th Century and sold to American homeowners and landscapers. Other destructive, non-native plants -- water hyacinth, kudzu, Johnson grass, to name three -- followed the same path through nursery sales.

By the mid-1930s, three to four billion American chestnut trees were dead. Trees hit by the blight were munched by the chestnut timber-borer beetle whose larvae tunneled through the wood, leaving what we now value highly, wormy chestnut. In the 20s and 30s, wormy chestnut was considered junk.

The fungus persists and destroys chestnut sprouts in a few years. I had one tree in our woods that grew to eight inches in diameter and bore nuts every year, but it died two years ago.

Stumps left from the final harvest of dead and dying chestnut in the 20s and 30s remain. I've shown them to my daughter in hope that she can imagine what neither of us can remember—what a forest with 100-foot-tall chestnut trees once looked like.

A few hundred mature native chestnuts survive, but no fully resistant tree has been found. A sizable effort has been made to engineer blight resistance from Asian trees into American chestnuts through backcross breeding and gene-transfer manipulation.

It's been hard to combine resistance with the American tree's rapid growth, straightness and other desirable qualities. Blight-resistant chestnuts are not yet available, but the American Chestnut Foundation and others are optimistic. (Susan Freinkel, [American Chestnut: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of a Perfect Tree.](#))

The loss of the American chestnut was inestimable. It was a fast-growing hardwood that sprouted from its own stump. It was easily milled and worked, adaptable to many soils, medicinal and resistant to rot and bugs. It had more than 30 commercial uses. Because it flowered late in the spring, it was a reliable and abundant producer of nuts that fed people, domesticated animals and wildlife.

In a sense, it was *the* tree of choice for about one-fourth of rural America, and particularly the eastern mountains. It sustained the ordinary farmer. It's lumber and nuts were the poor man's cash.

Chestnut that was cut on our farm framed our WWI-era house, paneled a few of the inside walls, built our barn and fenced our pastures. It was considered a common, undesirable wood for interior work. When those carpenters ran out of uptown red oak paneling, they finished a back bedroom in chestnut—then painted everything to hide the patch.

A couple of plebian arrowheads and several dozen rotting chestnut stumps remain on our farm.

They make me wonder every so often about what I am doing that contribute to changes like these.

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