



West Virginia Division of Forestry
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Earl Ray Tomblin, Governor
Randy Dye, Director/State Forester

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History is Alive and Growing at Clements State Tree Nursery By Leslie Fitzwater

West Columbia, W.Va. – History is often relegated to books, movies or museums, but at Clements State Tree Nursery in West Columbia, W.Va., America's history is represented through living, growing trees.

The nursery, which sits 11 miles north of Point Pleasant, is named for the family of one of America's greatest authors and humorists, Mark Twain. Twain's grandparents, Samuel and Pamela Clemens, settled on the site in 1803, which at the time was still part of the state of Virginia. Their eldest son John was licensed to practice law here before he moved west. He and his wife Jane eventually became the parents of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who is better known to us today by his pen name Mark Twain. So why is there a "t" in the nursery's name? One explanation is that Twain's father dropped the "t" when he started his new life in Missouri. The other is that the name was misspelled in historical records, with a "t" added when there actually was none. Nevertheless, the land where Clements State Tree Nursery sits today was once the home to Mark Twain's paternal grandparents. A historical highway marker is installed along W.Va. Rt. 62 commemorating the site.

The staff at Clements State Tree Nursery is keeping a historically important tree species from dying out altogether. The nursery's orchard is home to adult American chestnut trees that produce blight-resistant seed. The American chestnut once was a common component of forests across the eastern United States, but by 1930 the tree was nearly eradicated by a disease called chestnut blight.

"Our American chestnut seedlings show resistance to the blight, but they are not immune," said Nursery Superintendent Jason Huffman. "Our hope is to one day breed seedlings that are totally resistant to chestnut blight."

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Huffman's hope is also the hope of companies and landowners throughout West Virginia and surrounding states. Each year they buy all of the 5,000 to 10,000 American chestnut seedlings the nursery produces in an effort to repopulate the species.

"Everyone I've ever talked to would like to see the American chestnut make a full comeback and be as plentiful as it was at the turn of the 20th century," Huffman said. "We will continue our research and other cooperative efforts to try to make sure that happens."

In 1948, Americans donated more than 700 boxcars of relief goods to assist the French in their recovery after World War II. The following year, the French people repaid the debt by sending 49 boxcars of gifts to America. The train was dubbed The Merci Train and the cars were divided among the then 48 states; the contents of the 49th car were split between Washington, D.C. and the Territory of Hawaii. West Virginia's boxcar contained acorns and seedlings that grew to be what the nursery today calls "the French oak." The nursery grows French oak seedlings not only to sell, but also to honor veterans of World War II. "On several occasions, we have shipped seedlings to veterans' families for special plantings in remembrance of their brave loved ones," Huffman said.

To find out more about Clements State Tree Nursery or to download a catalog and order form, visit www.wvcommerce.org/ClementsNursery. To place an order by phone, call the nursery at 304.675.1820.

Become part of living history: Plant a seedling from Clements State Tree Nursery today.

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