

Apples and More Book Talk

by Liz Barker

Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard by William Kerrigan (2012) and Johnny Appleseed: the Man, the Myth, the American Story by Howard Means (2011) are two recent examinations of the pioneer folk hero who is credited with spreading the domestic apple in the Northwest Territory. Searching for actual evidence on the life and work of John Chapman results, in both books, in an extensive overview of frontier life and development, and various other pioneers. Grasping even a general outline of established information on Chapman himself seemed at various points to be a struggle as speculations meandered off on possibilities and other people who represented that potential. Most of it is very interesting and provided a good background for the story of Johnny (Appleseed) Chapman.

Neither author really settles on an evaluation of Chapman's motivations and actual accomplishments. The Johnny Appleseed myth extolls the selfless ragged wanderer subsisting on nuts and berries spreading apple seed across the land. Contrasting this are more recent accounts of multiple land purchases implying that he was a shrewd business man. Kerrigan seems to take more of a middle road and adds more regarding his apple spreading effectiveness. My "topic" may be prejudicing me but if I had to recommend one to read I would go for Kerrigan's.

John Chapman was born in Massachusetts. When he was quite young while his father was away, in the army, his mother died. Who cared for him and his older sister until the father returned isn't known. The father returned, remarried, and there were several more children. He did not do well. John apprenticed or left, probably at age 16, and possibly with a half-brother. Later relations with the family seem mixed and the two authors differ in their descriptions. The family moved to Pennsylvania and then Ohio.

John shows up in Ohio in the late 1790s - floating down the river in a double canoe filled with bags of apple seeds from a Pennsylvania cider mill. Kerrigan points out that Chapman's barefooted, ragged appearance would not have been that unusual on the frontier, nor would his solitary outdoor living have been unique. It's probable that he grew more eccentric as he aged and as the "norm" became more civilized.

There were many who went west. The biggest draw was land which, then as today, offered a path beyond subsistence. Land was cheap but required residency and improvements such as an orchard. The only native apple is a crab, but immigrants brought both peaches (which mature rapidly) and apples. Apples do not breed true and need to be grafted, a technique recorded in 6000 BC. Seedlings will produce fruit which is quite satisfactory for the production of cider. Beer (which required grain) and cider were the common beverages of the time.

Seedling apple trees, planted ahead of the westward moving pioneers, would be ready for transplanting and were cheaper than grafted trees. They would provide some of the residency and improvement requirements and produce apples earlier. Little mention was made of their grafting possibility - which puzzles me. Today not only varieties but root stocks are almost all clones of a quite limited number. "Wild" apple trees are belittled for the slight possibility of useful apple production though there are persons who are greatly concerned about the decreased genetic variation and strive to maintain their availability.

I must admit that I hadn't recognized how closely Johnny Appleseed was tied to the local area. Mt. Vernon and Mansfield were prominent nursery areas. (I'd also never thought that the temperance movement might include hard cider - and apple trees. Maybe Carry Nation's axe was also used to chop down apple trees.) As Ohio became more settled Johnny Appleseed moved farther west. He ended up in Fort Wayne, Indiana where he died in 1845. He was seventy-one years old. There's a detailed description of his final attire which included four pairs of slit open trousers shingling below his waist. His estate took ten years to settle. He had some property and apparently ample funds in later years but not enough to cover claims and burial.

Howard Means refers frequently to his preaching Swedenborgian gospel and sharing the good news. Kerrigan doesn't mention it until the midpoint of the book. Swedenborg was a very intellectual philosopher and there are questions about how an uneducated wanderer would become an adherent. The New Church, as it was called, did have establishments in both Philadelphia and Cincinnati. Chapman was a reader and is said to have never missed an outdoor revival. Kerrigan had a more helpful description of some beliefs which might have appealed to Johnny Appleseed. Independence, charity, and, usefulness were emphasized. One could improve in the afterlife, find a soul mate, and choose between heaven and hell.

The Johnny Appleseed of myth began shortly after Chapman's death and probably climaxed in the Disney version. Planting apple seeds was and is a nice counter to the more violent frontier heroes who drove out the Indians and conquered nature. There is some question about Chapman's early pacificism and vegetarianism and about his relation with Indians. The young John's tree clearing abilities are sometimes mentioned in almost Paul Bunyan terms. There seems to be no question about his relation to children and his generosity. He certainly planted apple seeds and sold young apple trees. He embodied many of the qualities that actually transformed the wilderness. Sometimes he is described as effeminate. One might speculate that having these qualities portrayed by a somewhat comical man has its advantages. Folktales and myths tend to elaborate on certain qualities and ignore others in order to tell a satisfying story that resonates with common beliefs.

The Fruit Hunters: a Story of Nature, Adventure, Commerce and Obsession by Adam Gollner (2008). This was a case of mistaken identity. My interpretation was of prehistoric

fruitarians and the influence of that diet on their development and dispersal. These fruit hunters are quite contemporary and looking for the exotic. There's the usual rather repetitive sojourn to distant lands to find and sample an astonishing variety of exotic fruits. Interspersed are numerous appropriate quotes, evidence both historical and prehistorical, plus a good description of the botanical implications and oddities of fruiting plants.

A section on commerce covers all of an environmentalist's horrors of multinational exploitive monopolies and flavorless fruit designed to look gorgeous and maintain a month long shipping and storage survival, achieved through the miracles of modern chemistry. A shorter section looks at some really bizarre botanical and cultural aspects.

A visit to a company developing apples infused with artificial grape flavoring led from Captain Simpson's bringing grape and apple seeds in 1826 to Wenatchee, WA (the apple capital of the world) to some apple facts. As of the 1990s China produced 25 M tons of apples and the U.S. 4.3. Our per capita consumption is 15.1 pounds per year, with a preference for buying sliced apples. McDonalds buys 54 M tons of Galas for apple dippers dredged in ascorbic acid, calcium salts and Vitamin C. There's a related DVD [Broken Limbs](#).

There's also a DVD [The Fruit Hunters](#) which I didn't watch, but I did find the book interesting enough to keep reading to the end, topic related or not.

[Cider: Making, Using & Enjoying Hard & Sweet Cider](#) (1997) by Lew Nichols & Annie Proulx (better known for writing *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Shipping News*). This is the 3rd edition (c1980) which attests to current interest. Hard cider production and consumption has blossomed along with micro-brewing popularity. (I made a point of purchasing, drinking, and enjoying some.)

Much is specific direction on a "12 step sequence of events in cider making, a discussion of...machinery, equipment, instruments, chemicals, additives...the when, why, and how". There is also plenty of information about varieties of apples, planting, grafting, and care. A section on apple jack and brandy includes some legal information. All of this has an experienced tone, different from either the solely anecdotal or researched.

There are numerous interesting notes throughout. Justifying John Chapman's seedlings, the importance of wild apples' more tannins is stressed. Most hydraulic cider presses up to the 1930s were made in Mt. Gilead - which might relate to the copper apple butter kettles still made in Bucyrus. There is no mention of apple butter though apple cider jelly, including how to make it from pomace, is there.

Apples have a high pectin content (essential for jelling), and a relatively high sugar content (essential for preservation). Possibly there's an answer here to my wondering about pioneer

jam/jelly production with sugar a dear commodity. Just as apple juice is a common filler for a wide range of juice products, apple jelly might have been a basis for pioneer fruit preserves.

Cider tasting is given a chapter. Recipes are limited but include a baked beans with cider which sounds really good. Plans for making your own press conclude with a page of ingenious adaptations. You can mount an automobile jack upside down to provide pressure or modify an old washer wringer with a spiral of stainless flat headed screws for grinding. The jack is probably easier to find than the wringer.

An Apple Tree through the Year by Claudia Schnieper (1987) is a children's book with color photographs and descriptions of exactly that. There's a flower diagram, references to pests and a bit about grafting.

Both Rooted in America: Folklore of Popular Fruits and Vegetables and Michael Pollan's Botany of Desire have a section on apples. Pollan's is mainly about Johnny Appleseed in his own inimitable style. The folklore includes the Greek golden apple which was awarded to Helen of Troy and leads to the Iliad and Odyssey. Two contemporary scandals that compromised the popularity of apples are included. One was the pesticide Alar scare, described as sending a mother running after the school bus to retrieve her child's lunch. Another was the Beechnut apple juice which was essentially artificial. Is that a counter or a forerunner to the ubiquitous use of apple juice as a filler?

The Backyard Orchardist by Stella Otto (2016) is a fairly comprehensive guide with chapters on specific species (apples, plum, figs etc.) and then general information on planting and care. Special features include a Q and A section and a chapter on growing fruit trees in containers. For someone thinking about planting a home orchard it's a good what to think about, plan for, and expect read - and would be a convenient reference afterwards.

The Apple Grower: a Guide for the Organic Orchardist by Michael Phillips (2005). This may not be everything one would want to know but it certainly covers a lot of what a very experienced and observant apple grower has learned over the years. There's a wonderful section, with both drawings and photographs, on pruning. The effects of where on the branch you prune and when you do it are explained and techniques and equipment described.

There are long chapters on diseases, and pests and their life cycles and how to counter them. A section on herbal and homeopathic practices explores the possibilities for enhancing the plant's natural defensive responses. Judicious use of chemical treatments, Integrated Pest Control, and a wide range of organic strategies are evaluated. A Certified Sensible label is suggested.

A concluding section covers several miscellaneous topics including the nutritional value of

organic processes, marketing, pick your own, and tours. End of the chapter notes provide easy access to details and sources. The appendix has a yearlong list of orchard chores, a source list, and a bibliography. This is not a sit down and read through book but it is very readable and full of anecdotal, informational, and speculative gems.