

To: Friends of Old Apples
From: Tom Brown

January 26, 2020

Apple Search---2020

Searching for old apples and working for their preservation has given my life meaning and joy after retirement. It is a great honor to be involved in something which will survive my lifetime. I look forward to each day as a new adventure just waiting to reveal itself; a fascinating path of discovery. The next story illustrates the interesting and unexpected paths encountered in searching for rare apple varieties.

In 2018 I had an apple exhibit at the Autumn Harvest Festival in Marlinton, WV which features the West Virginia Roadkill Cook-Off. One person told me about an Upside Down apple tree he remembered from Lincoln County, WV. In June, 2019, I decided to drive the 264 miles to make another attempt to find this elusive apple. I did find the home site but the tree was gone; an area lady mentioned another site where the apple had been. On my final minutes in the county I met a man who said I should go see Rufus Keeney in Fayette Co., WV, and "he has many old apple trees." Rufus did have ten apple trees including a Dutch, Strawberry, and Esta's All Purpose apple trees. Most interesting of all, he told me of previously having a Peggy apple tree. A tree by this name was planted at the site where two young girls (Betsy and Peggy Morris) were massacred by "Indians" in 1792; see my 2011 Apple Search Newsletter.

When I think about searching for rare apple varieties, I realize that there are so many wonderful memories: of walking for a mile in wet 8 inch deep snow to see apple trees on a Macon County, NC mountain top; of being invited to have lunch at the home of J B and Estell Keener with the comment of "all we have to serve you are Sunday left-overs", it was a wonderful country meal equaling any best meal of a lifetime; of seeing the look of amazement on the faces of young children as they stare at my festival apple display and then touch the apples; of Ms. Mary Mason offering me a serving of her Yellow Potts apples which were so good that I actually had three bowls full; the excitement of getting up early for another trip to West Virginia searching for the Upside Down apple (five trips so far); of being asked to participate in the famous Junior Johnson's country breakfast (NASCAR legend), listening to Bryant Lowe tell of apples and other things of long ago, an unlimited number of stories, never repeating himself. These are not just memories of the past, exciting memories await me in the future.

Joe Willis---A special occasion was meeting Joe Willis of Spruce Pine. I had gone to Joe's home because he had old apple trees and made handles. I needed a curved handle for my Dad's Boy Scout hatchet. Joe lived well off the road in an "aged wood" four room house; it looked like it had never been painted. On my return trip to get the handle, I went to his front porch and knocked but no one answered. On the porch I noticed a metal trough, about 60" x 15" with 2.5" turned-up sides. I then went around to the back porch and knocked on the door and Joe greeted me. On this smaller porch was a similar metal trough but about 36" long. Joe and I talked about many things for an hour, including his apple trees, his favorite a Sugar Loaf Pippin. I then thought to ask Joe, "What are the metal troughs for?" Joe replied, "They are to feed my raccoons." He told me that they usually came in about dusk and he had as many as twenty-one at his house on one occasion. He said that every week he bought two large bags of dog food and a bag of sunflower seeds for them. Their favorite treat was cookies. Under half of his house was a dug-out cellar and a crawl space under the other half. He said they had tunneled under the foundation and that ten to twelve raccoons lived under the house; sometimes he would hear them squabbling at night. During my brief visit I saw no raccoons. I stopped in for a mid-afternoon visit about a year and a half later. I found Joe in his handle shop making wooden back-scratchers. We talked for a while and I happened to glance back at the house and on the porch was a raccoon. Joe looked and said that this was a fairly new raccoon that he had not yet named. He then went into the house and got cookies. I was able to capture a picture of Joe feeding the raccoon a cookie. Other raccoons, more familiar with Joe, would eat directly from his hand. These are animals that people are often afraid of, but you can see how friendly they can be with a caring approach by a gentle man.



Getting Started---I became interested in heritage apples while going to the farmer's market at the Winston-Salem fairgrounds. A man, Maurice Marshall, would come there in the late summer and early fall and sell heritage apples. I was fascinated by the interesting names, various colors, and unique tastes. Eventually I learned that there was a lost apple variety, Harper's Seedling, from my area of Forsyth County. Informally I started looking for the apple without any success. I approached the local newspaper, Winston-Salem Journal, about my looking for the apple. They published an article and I received twelve responses but did not locate a Harper's Seedling tree; eventually I discovered five locations where trees had been. I next approached the Yadkin Ripple newspaper and they did an article, only two unsuccessful responses; Harper's Seedling trees had been sold in that county over 100 years ago by the Cedar Cove Nursery. In one final apple discovery attempt, I approached my hometown newspaper, the Statesville Record and Landmark (Iredell County, NC), and they did an article about my looking for heritage apples. Success! I did not find the Harper's Seedling, but I did find trees of the following: Yellow Potts, Red Potts, Watts Limbertwig, and Mosey apples. Back then there was no social media and no multiple cable TV channels and so people were better at responding to newspaper articles. I continued my apple search in Iredell County and the county to the west, Alexander County; successfully finding additional rare apple varieties.

Wilkes County---Many people said that I should go to Wilkes County to look for old apples. They did so because apples were grown commercially in the Brushy Mountains near the Wilkes/Alexander county line. I did go to Wilkes County, but what these people did not realize was that the county was the ultimate mother-load of old apple varieties. There were many surviving apple trees and many elderly people who remembered the apple descriptions, people who could identify the old varieties. I

eventually found 300 apple varieties associated with the county. Multiple people told me that their fathers or grandfathers took pride in having different apple varieties. For instance I could stop at a home with three apple trees, all would be rare and all different from each other; then six houses down the road there would be a home with four apple trees, each different and all different from those at the first house. I was disappointed if I did not find a rare apple variety every time I went to Wilkes County.

My apple searching was facilitated if I could find a local person who could go with me to visit new contact homes. An especially helpful local person was Ebert Billings, a retired minister, who was welcome in any home in an eight-mile radius of his Shepard's Crossroads home; I found about nine apple varieties with Ebert's assistance. Not all "the Wilkes County apples" were found in Wilkes County; for instance a man described a Soda apple to me and it was found in Madison County and its identity was confirmed by the Wilkes man. Finding 300 apple varieties might seem impossible, but it was made possible by a unique period in my life; much of that time I had no orchard, no nursery, and no pets and I could go to Wilkes County three days a week and half of the county was only an hour from my home.

Festival Participation---One way I find old apples is to go to many festivals a year where I have an old apple display; for instance in 2019 I participated in twelve festivals. Two of these were on the same weekend 221 miles apart (Ferrum, VA and Morristown, TN). In twenty years I have participated in at least 150 festivals, where people stop to look at the apples and tell me about apples they remember and suggest people who I should contact; sometimes telling me about their rare apple tree.

I know that this is the era of the internet and social media, but I do not get much help unless I show up at a person's door. This limits my apple search area to North Carolina and six close-by states. Now I often travel increasingly further distances to look for old apples, as an example, almost four hours of travel is required for me to just reach the edge of Kentucky. For these longer trips I typically get up at 2:30 am and leave the house by 3:30, trying to return by 8:00 pm; this gives me a full day in the apple search area---I call such a trip "a three No Doze pill day". Unless I have a local person with me, I prefer to search alone, so I can concentrate on just finding apples and do not have to be concerned about another's comfort and if they are having a good time that day, or justify which search road is chosen.

Finding Old Apples---Finding certain old apples is difficult, especially so as more apple trees are cut down or die and as more people pass away who remember the trees. I believe in "big numbers" and the greater number of contacts I can make increases the likelihood of success. Sometimes I will schedule a festival in a particular area to try to find an apple associated with the area; participating in the Grainger County Tomato Festival (TN) to find Pig Nose and Joshaway apples. Occasionally it is luck: I dial a wrong number, the man stays on the line when I mention apples and then he takes me to a Barker's Liner tree.

Often finding the old apples is easy, you just have to get out there and try. While exhibiting at the Blue Ridge Folklife Festival (Ferrum College, VA), people mentioned remembering Red Coat apples at Union Hall and then the Burnt Chimney communities, about 17 miles apart in Franklin County, VA. One Saturday I drove the 100 miles to get to the area where I planned to drive between the two communities looking for the Red Coat. Starting out west of Union Hall, I drove about a mile and a half north when I saw three men sitting under a tree and I stopped asked them if they knew the location of a Red Coat apple tree. They told me the locations of two Red Coat trees, naming one of the tree owners.

Looking for the old apples requires much driving and I have two Subaru's: a 1995 with 345,222 miles (now called the "doggie wagon") and a 2004 with 353,890 miles ("apple wagon"). My apple search effort has been entirely self-funded with the exception of about \$3,000 and \$2,000 of that was from a kind individual in a distant state who I have never met.

The apple varieties found have generously been shared with preservation orchards (105 apple varieties given to Horne Creek Living Historical Farm) and up to 500 apple varieties shared with others who sell old apple trees; donated to the preservation orchards and the individuals at no cost to them.

Identifying Apples---People often send me a picture of an apple from 600 miles away and hope I will know the variety; it is not that easy. For instance, for the old varieties, they almost completely change if

a person travels 20 miles, the distance a person traveled on a horse in a day years ago. To assist identification, I have a stack of old apple texts about three feet high and hundreds of apple descriptions from actual previous tree owners. Frequently someone will tell me of an apple they remember and I will record their description in as much detail as possible; then later I will find an apple which fits the description and then I will show the apples to the first person to see if it is the apple they described.

Here is an example of using this technique. In Macon County, NC, two men separately told me of a Manson Beauty apple tree they remembered; “beautiful red apple with red streaks in the flesh”. About five years later I did find an apple tree on a near-by mountain top with apples which perfectly fit their descriptions but unfortunately both of the men had passed away and could not confirm its identity. Later my wife and I read in our local newspaper about a nice farmers market in Roanoke, VA. We did go, deciding that it would be a nice day trip traveling about two hours by interstate highways. On the return, I told my wife, “Let’s go back through the country in case we can spot an apple tree.” About 20 miles south of Roanoke I saw a home with two large apple trees; I stopped and knocked on the door and a man came out and said that the trees were Winesaps. I asked if there were any other apples he remembered; he said “Yes, we had a Manson Beauty apple tree” and described the apple. I went back to Macon County, 300 miles away, and got some of the apples and mailed them to him. I followed up with a call and he said that they were definitely the Manson Beauty apples. Many ID’s are this involved.

Past My Time?---I am 78 and it had been quite a few years since there had been an article about my looking for old apples. I thought that everything eventually winds down, perhaps this was the case for me; little did I know of the events to come. Eric Wallace did an article about my apple search which was published in the Appalachian Voice August/September issue, 2019. He followed up with the Okra Magazine, publication scheduled for February. Then another magazine took pictures for fall, 2020 publication. There were also newspaper articles in the Lincoln Journal (WV) and Virginia Gazette (VA). I was at the Mountain Heritage Day (Western Carolina University) sitting at my apple display table and someone came by and took a picture of me and posted it on social media with five short lines of kind comments. This ended up on Reddit and I received 165 email contacts in October & November. About January 1, 2020 someone posted the same picture on Facebook and in seven days I received about 1,000 email contacts. Mike McGrath interviewed me on his You Bet Your Garden Show. There was a National Public Radio blog posting. This made me fully realize the power of social media.

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Posting Which Went Viral



cottagecore

January 1 at 12:28 PM · 🌐

This man's collection of lost apples varieties.

He has a website that you can buy saplings from!! This is a great way to fight back against corporate farming and the destruction of heirloom foods (which while usually 'ugly', are heartier, and more nutritious than store bought varieties, and more delicious).

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