

Lives that Lift

C L Paddock 1935



Johnny Appleseed

Did you know that there really was a man known as Johnny Appleseed? Yes, it is true and here is his story.

A good many years have flown by since John Chapman left his beautiful and comfortable home in Pennsylvania and started on the long journey to the New West, that he might encourage the settlers to plant apple trees in the new country, then a wilderness.

No one asked him to leave his home, and to accept the life of sacrifice and hardship which his chosen mission entailed. It was a self-imposed task, a labor of love.

He has gone to his rest these many years, but there is today, a monument to his faithfulness on practically every farm in the Ohio valley; not monuments of marble and stone, but apple orchards, most of which are descendants from the apple trees which grew from the seeds planted by this self-sacrificing man of vision.

He was born in 1775, and as a boy had an inherent love for the out-of-doors. It was not unusual for him to be absent from the family board at meal time, and he was often away from home for three and four days at a time, but the family had no alarm, for they knew full well John was wandering about in the woods near his home. While he spent much time studying nature first hand, he also secured a good education in books, considering the fact that he lived in a day when books and schools were few.

When a young man he moved to what is now Pittsburgh, and on the banks of the Ohio River built a substantial home of stone and logs. Here he started a nursery. There were many apple orchards in that vicinity and many of the farmers had cider mills. John Chapman noticed that the apple seeds were not used, so secured permission from the farmers to gather them, and neighbors say he spent many hours washing the apple seeds from the pulp, and might often be seen trudging homeward with a linen sack full of apple seeds on his back. Many of these seeds were carefully, almost reverently planted, and in a few years he had an orchard without an equal in that district. It was the admiration of all who saw it.

About this time there was a movement of settlers toward the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. The Train was not making its trips west in those days, and the pioneers came by hundreds and thousands down the Ohio River, and of course had to pass by John Chapman's nursery and orchard.

His home was the kind Mr. Foss has written about in his poem, "The House by the side of the Road," the road in this case being the Ohio River. Many of the brave-hearted, adventurous pioneers found rest and food and encouragement beneath his roof. It was a haven of rest in the wilderness. At his table they found luxuries as well as necessities, milk, butter, honey and fruits.

When they started on their journey again after a rest in his home, he supplied them with necessities for the journey. He always had apples in abundance the year round. Anything he had was theirs for the asking. Many a disheartened family found new courage here for the remainder of their tiresome and perilous journey.

As each settler left John Chapman's home, this good Samaritan gave to his departing guest a little deer-skin bag containing apple seeds, only asking in return that the settler promise to plant the apple seeds around his new home in the West. Many were the bags of apple seeds which he started on their journey west. Many of them of course did not reach their destination. And some which were planted did not grow. To the pioneers in this country apples seemed like a luxury and other things took first place. Naturally the apple trees were neglected. He soon realized that his dreams were not all coming true, so he determined that he would go himself and help the farmers in planting and caring for their young orchards.

A man was drowned in the Ohio River close to Mr. Chapman's farm, and his family was left destitute. To the widow and children John gave his home and orchard near Pittsburgh, and he began to make plans for the long journey. Surely no selfish reasons would cause a man to leave his beautiful home with all its comforts, to go west to plant orchards for others, enduring the hardships and privations of a pioneer life in a new country.

Gathering together several barrels of apple seeds, he sewed them in watertight bags, he lashed two Indian dugouts together and started on his long trip down the Ohio. We need not take time to describe his journey. There were adventures, to be sure, and hardships and discouragements, but before him there was always that vision of this new land blossoming with apple trees, and he pressed on.

In this new land he might be seen traveling about on foot, carrying with him a bag of apple seeds, a hatchet, an axe, and a hoe. With the tools he cleared out the underbrush and prepared a place for his precious seeds. The settlers were few and the cabins far apart, so he often had to sleep in the open. Exposure brought on typhoid fever, but he was tenderly cared for by one of the settlers. When he was strong enough he returned to Pittsburgh for another supply of apple seeds.

For more than forty years he labored unselfishly, establishing more than one hundred nurseries and helping thousands of settlers to plan and plant their orchards.

One old settler in Ohio describes him as "a good, kind, generous man," who "thought it was wrong to spend money on clothes to be worn just for the fine appearance. He thought if he was comfortably clad, and in attire that suited the weather, it was sufficient. His head covering was usually a pasteboard hat of his own making, with one broad side to it, which he wore next to the sunshine to protect his face. It was an unsightly object, to be sure, yet never one of us children ventured to laugh at it. We held Johnny in too tender regard.

"His pantaloons were old and scant and short, with some sort of substitute for suspenders. He never wore a coat except in the wintertime. Sometimes he wore old shoes or moccasins, but if he had none,

and the rough roads hurt his feet, he substituted sandals, simply rude soles, with thong fastenings. The bosom of his shirt was always pulled out loosely, so as to make a kind of pocket or pouch in which he carried his books, for wherever he went, he carried religious literature, which he circulated. If the supply was not equal to the demand, he would tear a book in two, giving a portion to each person."

He was a heaven-sent visitor to the lonely inhabitants in their small, crude cabins, in a wild, desolate country. He was always welcome to their humble homes, and whatever they had was his without even the asking. He not only carried apple seeds and literature, but he was "all things to all men." If there was death in the family he helped to make the coffin and prepare the loved one for burial, even digging the grave, and conducting a simple funeral ceremony as best he could, speaking words of comfort and reading from the Bible by the open grave.

Day after day, in the heat of summer and in the cold of winter, he trudged back and forth over this new country, planting apple seeds and caring for the young orchards which he had planted. He became known to the settlers as Johnny Appleseed, and many of the settlers knew him by no other name.

Why was he willing to leave his beautiful home and live a life of privation in a new country? Many went west for gold, but his pay was the joy of being of service, in seeing the seeds he had planted growing and blossoming, yes, in seeing the trees bearing apples, and in seeing the children eating the luscious fruit around their firesides. To him this pay was better than the gold which perisheth. There is a joy and satisfaction in having a vision, and in making one's dreams come true.

His years of travel in all kinds of weather told on even such a rugged frame as John Chapman's. Privation and hardship left their marks on his body, and in his later years he secured a horse and buggy to carry him on his rounds, for his limbs were growing feeble and failed to meet his demands.

One of his last tasks was lovingly caring for a young orchard which had been neglected by the young man left in charge of it. It was while at this task, in 1847, that he fell ill, due to overexposure. One afternoon as the sun was sinking in the west he asked his friends to carry his bed out into the orchard, that he might see again some of the last trees he had planted. There amidst the trees his hands had so tenderly cared for, the humble, self-sacrificing man -of vision fell asleep and was lovingly laid to rest at Fort Wayne, Indiana. Many who visit his resting place today have been influenced to live a better life because of the deeds of Johnny Appleseed.

News of his death was sent to Washington, where Congress was in session. General Sam Houston, of Texas, arose by his seat and said "This old man was one of the most useful citizens of the world in his humble way. He has made a greater contribution to our civilization than we realize. He has left a place that can never be filled. Farewell, dear old eccentric heart! Your labor has been a labor of love, and generations yet unborn will rise up and call you blessed."

Books have been written about him. Monuments have been erected to his memory, and many visit his grave annually. And his work lives on. One of the greatest wants of our world is for men, men of vision, unselfish men, humble men, men who will work without the prospect of gold, men with the qualities of dear old Johnny Appleseed.