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The Tale of Johnny Appleseed

The apple-tree-planting legend, thought to be a myth by many, did more than just plant seeds

By Sarah Achenbach

The heroes of American folklore—Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, digging the Grand Canyon, Pecos Bill shooting stars out of the Texas sky—make for amusing, if fictitious, fables. One tall tale rises above the myth: the real-life legend of Johnny Appleseed, a barefoot pauper wearing a tin-pot on his head who planted apple trees across the American wilderness in what is now Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio.

Separating fiction from fact in the well-known tale of Appleseed offers a richer story than the one oft repeated around 19th-century campfires or captured in classic Walt Disney animation. "Johnny Appleseed" was Jonathan "John" Chapman, born Sept. 26, 1774, a nurseryman from Leominster, Mass., and son of a Revolutionary War Minuteman. An article in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1871 confirms that Chapman was frequently shoeless, and the tin-pot he traveled with was used for cooking, gathering berries and, yes, wearing. Though two stalwarts of the Appleseed legend are untrue—he never played with a bear family or thwarted a rattlesnake bite with the hardened soles of his feet—Chapman did accomplish most of what the folklore heralds.

After stints at cider mills in Virginia and western Pennsylvania, Chapman loaded a packhorse with apple seeds in 1801 and headed to Ohio. The tall tale has him happily meandering across green fields, sprinkling seeds and communing with woodland creatures. True, from the early 1800s until his death of pneumonia in 1845 in Fort Wayne, Ind., Chapman was a wanderer. Settlers would offer lodging or he'd sleep under the stars, but the route he traveled and his planting method were far from whimsical.

Business schools today would hail Chapman as a visionary for his knack of anticipating a market for his apple trees by establishing nurseries ahead of the waves of pioneers heading west. When he established his first nursery near Licking Creek, Ohio, only three white families had settled in the area. By the time Chapman's trees were mature, pioneer families had begun to take root in the region, ready for his apple trees and their fruit. Historians note that he rarely made a poor location choice, with many towns similarly taking seed near his nurseries.

After purchasing the land, he would plant each nursery with free seed from cider mills, then Chapman would leave the nursery in the care of a manager, who sold the trees on shares. Chapman returned every few years to tend the trees and to collect any payments. Had he been concerned solely with material gain, Chapman would be remembered along with other giants of industry, as it is estimated that he planted well over 100,000 square miles of apple trees across what was then known as the Northwest Territory.

But this is where his life morphs into legend. When Chapman would come collecting, if no earnings were to be had, he would never press for payment (typically 6 ¼ cents per tree), often taking food or clothing instead. A devout Christian and missionary for the Church of the New Jerusalem, founded by the Swedish scientist and Lutheran reformer Emanuel Swedenborg, Chapman believed his calling was planting fruit trees for the pioneers and preaching to the families he would meet.

Gentle and kind, Chapman was a friend to all: settlers, the Mohicans who inhabited the region and animals. He had a conversational knowledge of several Indian languages and was respected by numerous tribes, often mediating disputes between the incoming settlers and the tribes.

During the War of 1812, both British soldiers and Indian warriors were terrorizing the Ohio frontier by killing settlers. After the murder of a shopkeeper in August 1813, the pioneers in the Ohio countryside (now the Mansfield-Mount

In 1871, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* showcased drawings of Johnny Appleseed preparing the land to plant what would ultimately become his legacy.

Vernon region) were alarmed about a possible Indian attack. Chapman ran from house to house, across 26 miles, day and night, to warn people to take shelter.

While he lived simply, he was not penniless. Chapman bought and sold many tracts of land for apple tree nurseries as the frontier expanded. He also occasionally purchased a few acres of land to save a horse that was being mistreated. If the animal recovered, Chapman, who was a vegetarian, would give it and the land to someone in need—for the price of a promise to treat the horse well. He left an estate of more than 1,200 acres to his sister, but the 1837 financial panic wreaked havoc on the value of his land. His trees were only bringing 2 to 3 cents each, less than half the price they usually fetched at 6 ¼ cents. Most of Appleseed's land had to be sold for estate taxes and litigation. Orchardists have traced his only surviving tree to a farm in Nova, Ohio, and the Grimes Golden apple variety is believed to be a direct descendant of his trees.

Johnny Appleseed's life-well-lived is the stuff of American legends. Chapman's legacy blossoms in annual apple festivals, folk tales, books, movies, a 1960s British comic book series, Apple, Inc. computer ads, an appearance in a fantasy video game and—perhaps most fittingly and lasting—in the beloved words of the traditional song named for him and sung as a grace across the land.

The Lord is good to me,
And so I thank the Lord,
For giving me the things I need,
The sun, and the rain and the apple seed.
Oh, the Lord is good to me.