The Decline of the Apple

The development of the apple in this century has been partially a retrogression. Its breeding program has been geared almost completely to the commercial interests. The criteria for selection of new varieties have been an apple that will keep well under refrigeration, an apple that will ship without bruising, an apple of a luscious color that will attract the housewife to buy it from the supermarket bins. That the taste of this selected apple is inferior has been ignored. As a result, sharpness of flavor and variety of flavor are disappearing. The apple is becoming as standardized to mediocrity as the average manufactured product. And as small farms with their own orchards dwindle and the average person is forced to eat only apples bought from commercial growers, the coming generations will scarcely know how a good apple tastes.

This is not to say that all of the old varieties were good. Many of them were as inferior as a Rome Beauty or a Stark's Delicious. But the best ones were of an excellence that has almost disappeared.

As a standard of excellence by which to judge, I would set the Northern Spy as the best apple ever grown in the United States. To bite into the tender flesh of a well-ripened Spy and have its juice ooze around the teeth and its rich tart flavor fill the mouth and its aroma rise up into the nostrils is one of the outstanding experiences of all fruit eating. More than this, the Spy is just as good when cooked as when eaten raw. Baked, in pies, in applesauce, it holds its firmness and its flavor.

I speak of the Northern Spy in the present because it is still being sold, usually at top prices, at the older orchards in the northeast. One can even buy it occasionally in the larger cities, at exorbitant prices. But I doubt that it is being planted much, if at all, in the newer commercial orchards. There is a reason for this. The Northern Spy tree is large, and difficult to keep in shape for picking. It is sometimes an erratic bearer, and the fruit is very susceptible to a wire worm, which writes tiny scrolls of brown through the flesh and gives it a bitter taste.

The Northern Spy is purely an American apple. It originated
as a chance seedling at East Bloomfield, N.Y., about 1800. By 1840 it had begun to attract general attention throughout the northeast. No one seems to know what ancestry lies behind it.

It is typical of the breeding programs of this century that in some orchards the Northern Spy has been replaced by the Red Northern Spy, which has a more brilliant red skin than the Northern Spy and is therefore more likely to attract attention for sale. But in taste the Red Northern Spy is only a shadow of the old Northern Spy.

My other standard of excellence has almost disappeared. It is the Spitzenburg, originally known as the Esopus Spitzenburg because it originated at Esopus, in Ulster County, N.Y. Its date of origin is not known, but by 1900 throughout New York State it was considered an old apple. In my childhood no farm orchard would be without one Spitzenburg tree, as beautiful in fruit in October as when in blossom in May.

The fruit is of medium size, semi-conic in shape but not long, and somewhat ribbed. The skin is a deep, rich yellow verging into bright red; at its best, completely flaming red marked by pale yellow dots. The flesh is tinged with yellow, firm, crisp, tender, aromatic, not quite as juicy as the Northern Spy. But the taste is unique, as good in its way as the Spy. And like the Spy it is as good cooked as when eaten raw. It was always considered the supreme apple for baking.

A few commercial orchards still have an old tree or two tucked away in a corner. Some twenty years ago, when I was in my fifties, I went to one of these orchards to get some Spitzenburg scions for grafting. The owner of the orchard turned me over to his father, whom I judged to be in his eighties, to show me the tree. On the way I tried to make conversation by saying I thought the Spitzenburg a pretty good apple. Whereupon the old gentlemen stopped, turned in his tracks, looked at me severely, and said, "Young man, the Spitzenburg is the best apple God ever invented."

In recent years I have heard of no new plantings. One seedling of the Spitzenburg, the Jonathan, not as inferior to the Spitzenburg as the Red Spy is to the Northern Spy, is still being planted in at least one orchard for use in commercial applesauce. But the Spitzenburg itself is too good to be lost. Its gene source should be used for breeding.

One variety, older than either the Spy or the Spitzenburg, has managed to hold a small place in commercial orchards. It is the Rhode Island Greening, more commonly called the Greening. It originated in the 1700's in Rhode Island, near Newport,
at a place known as Green's End, where a Mr. Green kept a tavern and raised apple trees from seed. The fruit of the original tree was occasionally given to visitors at the tavern, and the visitors who came back in succeeding springs asking for grafts from the tree started the Greening on its two centuries of success. Its fame soon spread throughout the northeast. It is a long-lived and sturdy, wide-spreading tree. One tree cut down in 1903 was known to be nearly 200 years old.

The fruit is large; the skin, grass green varying to dull yellow, sometimes with a cinnamon blush on the sun side. It is an inferior apple to eat raw, but in many households in the northeast it still reigns supreme as a cooking apple. Less tart than either the Spy or the Spitzenburg, it has a unique mellow flavor that any apple fancier can detect at once in a pie or in applesauce.

Other old varieties have disappeared completely. I doubt that one can now find a Russet, except in an arboretum of old varieties of apples. Yet the Russet was once one of the commonest varieties. A smaller apple, dull green with russet flaking on its skin, rock hard until midwinter, it was actually a mediocre apple both for eating raw and for cooking. Its virtue lay in its keeping ability. In the days before refrigeration it was one of the apples that could be shipped long distances. With modern shipping under refrigeration that quality was no longer as important, and the Russet disappeared.

The Red Astrachan is another important apple that has almost disappeared with the demise of the home orchard and the reliance upon commercial plantings. Once again, no farm orchard of my childhood would have been without a Red Astrachan tree. It is a Russian apple, imported first to Sweden, thence to England, and thence before 1835 into the United States by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society from the London Horticultural Society. It is one of the early ripening apples known as "harvest apples", and the most important of this group. In central New York State it ripens about the middle of August, sometimes earlier. It has no keeping ability. Two days after it is ripe it begins to deteriorate unless put under refrigeration. A medium-sized apple with a fiery red skin and much too tart for eating raw, it vies with the Spitzenburg and the Greening for cooking. Of all apples, it makes the best jelly or marmalade. Both in jelly and in applesauce made by cooking with the skin and straining, the red color of the skin comes through as a bright pink in the finished product. Its flavor both in pies and in applesauce is as good as one can find. Its lack of keeping ability makes it a complete loss for the modern commercial markets,
but it remains a most valuable variety for anybody with a home orchard. It can be kept under refrigeration over the winter, but it must be used immediately when brought into warmth. I know one home owner who puts a couple of bushels in refrigeration each summer simply for the joy of having Red Astrachan pie and applesauce the next spring; its freshly made applesauce, when canned, will hold its taste for a year with little deterioration.

The tree is unfortunately a biennial bearer, but there are two varieties extant, completely similar except for the fact that their bearing years alternate with each other so that with sufficient room one can have a tree of each and have Red Astrachans every summer.

All of the harvest apples are disappearing as home orchards disappear. Commercially they are valueless, since once ripe they will not keep long enough to be displayed anywhere except on an orchard's roadside stand. But in the days before refrigeration, when the winter apples had gone by the next May, they were an important summer delight. And even now their loss means the loss of the flavor of a fresh apple in midsummer, for the refrigerated apples now sold in midsummer are flat to the taste.

The earliest of the harvest apples was the Yellow Transparent, which sometimes began to ripen by the Fourth of July. It was another Russian apple, this one imported directly from Russia by the USDA in 1870. It is a medium-sized, butter yellow apple, juicy and pleasant to the taste, but quickly becoming mushy and dry. For cooking it is not sufficiently tart and holds no form. The tree, however, is an annual and heavy bearer. It is still available at some fruit nurseries.

A better variety in our area was a slightly larger and whiter apple known locally as White Transparent. I have been unable to trace this, unless it is the variety called Early Harvest in Beach's *Apples of New York*. If so it was an American apple, and was in 1903 already over 100 years old. Its liability was that it was a biennial bearer.

One of the common harvest apples, the Sweet Bough, belonged also to that group known as "sweet apples". The sweet apples are all, as the name implies, without tartness, and though many of them are fine for eating raw, they are valueless for applesauce or pies. They were cooked, however, by quartering, coring, and then boiling them with plenty of sugar, either with or without the skins, for an hour or two over a low flame. Cooked so, they made a fine, sweet dessert.
I have not seen a Sweet Bough for years, though I think I have seen a listing of it in a nursery catalogue. It was, as I remember it, a good-sized green apple with a golden tint, and probably its main distinction was in being a sweet apple that ripened so early. It was an American variety, on the scene before 1817.

Two other sweet apples used to be common. The Pound Sweet, listed officially as the Pumpkin Sweet, vied among apples for size with the Tompkins King. It is a good eating apple, but it has the unfortunate habit of waterlogging. The flesh of the sections around the core, and sometimes of almost the whole apple, are transformed into a translucent golden green, which however does not seem to change its taste.

The other common sweet apple was the Tolman Sweet, which was a small, butter yellow apple with faint russet dots. Being small it was used not only for boiling but for pickling. And since the tree is very hardy, it was at one time used extensively as a grafting stock.

The Tompkins King, which I have mentioned, is not a sweet apple, but it is the largest apple I have ever seen, specimens often being as big around as the largest grapefruit. It is a showy apple, its skin red with sunlight yellow shining through. Eaten raw it has a pleasant tart taste, not distinctive, and it is not sufficiently tart to be a good cooking apple. As a tree it was considered desirable because its limbs grew out horizontally and needed little pruning, also it is a good annual bearer. It originated as a seedling in northern New Jersey, but a graft of it was given to one Jacob Wycoff of Tompkins County, N.Y., who gave it the name of King.

The rise and fall in popularity of certain strains of apples is curious. I have said that the Spitzenburg was considered indispensable for the home orchard of the turn of the century. Another apple of the same strain, the Baldwin, was in 1903 the leading variety in commercial orchards in New York, New England, southern Canada, Michigan, and northern Ohio. It originated shortly after 1740 as a chance seedling on the farm of John Ball, at Wilmington, Mass., near Lowell. It was by no means as good an apple as the Spitzenburg, but it was a larger apple, an easier tree to grow, and as a keeper sufficiently good that it was used for export trade along with the Russet, even before refrigeration.

The fruit is large to very large, the skin tough, light yellow blushed with bright red, with conspicuous gray dots. The prevailing effect is bright red, but darker than the Spitzenburg.
The flesh is yellowish, firm, crisp, and juicy. Though neither raw nor cooked is it as good an apple as the Spitzenburg, it is nevertheless an all around good usable apple. But I think that no variety has disappeared so rapidly and so completely as the Baldwin.

The strain that supplanted it was the Fameuse strain, which had dawdled for 200 years without much success. The Fameuse, more commonly known in the United States as the Snow, was a French apple, of which either a plant or seed was brought to the United States from France in the late 1600's. The Snow is a very small apple; red, with glistening white flesh filled with juice; delicious to eat but of little value for cooking. It was sparingly planted in home orchards. Then sometime before 1870 the strain yielded a chance seedling on the McIntosh homestead in Dundas County, Ontario, and that chance seedling, the McIntosh, was destined to change the commercial production of all the northeastern United States. Its popularity grew slowly at first, and then with a rush. In my childhood there was not a single McIntosh apple tree in the Schoharie Valley of New York, then a high producing apple section. It was, I think, about 1915 that the McIntosh apple first began to appear in the city markets, and once there it became the apple that everybody wanted. Part of its immediate success may have been its novelty to its public, which had not known so beautiful a red apple; one so tender and with so much juice, so good to the taste. It had, and has, its liabilities. In spite of being an apple beautiful to look at and delicious to bite into, its skin is annoyingly tough; it keeps very poorly; and when cooked it goes to complete mush, although good tasting mush. It has managed to hold its own all during the middle of the century. Its place is now being superseded by an apple of the same strain, the Cortland, which keeps and ships better than the McIntosh, but unfortunately has lost the edge of sharp taste which kept the Fameuse strain alive those 200 years.

One variety that as far as I know never reached commercial importance and yet was fairly common in home orchards was the Yellow Bellflower. Locally in central New York it was known as the White Spitzenburg, perhaps because it had the same ribbed semi-conic shape of the Spitzenburg. It may have had an origin from French seed, since the name was sometimes given as Bellefleur, but the original tree, large and old, was in 1817 still standing on a farm in Burlington County, N.J.

The tree is large and vigorous. The fruit, lemon to butter yellow, russet-dotted, sometimes with a pinking cheek, ripens
late, in October; but even then it is not at its best. Of all the old apples, like the Russet it is one of the best keepers, but unlike the Russet, its flavor improves during the keeping, and is at its best after being stored in the cellar until March or April of the next spring. It is then a delicious eating apple, with a mellow taste equal in quality to the taste of a cooked Greening. Neither taste has ever, as far as I know, been duplicated in other apples.

But I speak actually from little knowledge. The 1845 catalogue of the Prince Nursery on Long Island offered 350 varieties of apples, including already the Baldwin. Three hundred and fifty varieties: Think of the different tastes one will never know, the fascinating names of apples never to be tasted; the Fallawater, whose only claim to distinction seems to have been its size, the Black Gilliflower, a long red apple with a pointed nose. Perhaps the Black Gilliflower is the apple I knew as the Sheep’s Nose, though our Sheep’s Nose was more green than red, with dull reddish streaks, and a solid somewhat mealy flesh. It was probably an ancestor of the modern Red Delicious, for it was as dry to the lips and as insipid to the tongue; its only distinction being its strange shape.

One variety that I have never been able to identify surely was the apple called locally the Pomeroy, though I assume that this was the anglicized version of Pomme Roy, an apple long thought to be French but later believed to have originated in Rhode Island before the Revolution. I remember it only as a pale yellow apple, mild, delicious to eat raw, but the last tree I knew disappeared 60 years ago.

One wonders why certain varieties ever became popular. The Hubbardston, originating in Hubbardston, Mass., before 1832, was never more than a mediocre apple, yet it still lingers in a few orchards. Perhaps the low mark of the old varieties that were once much planted was the Ben Davis; a beautiful apple to look at, brilliant red and shining, but inside dry, coarse, and tasteless. A great many of small commercial orchards got stuck with the Ben Davis, having planted good stands of the new and much touted variety, and brought them to production only to find that buyers bought the fruit one year and never again. There was nothing then to do but tear the trees out and replace with another variety. On the other hand there are, I am sure, many local varieties that still remain popular in their own localities. The Smokehouse is one of these, named from an original tree that grew near a smokehouse on the farm of William Gibbons, Lancaster County, Penna. It is still a popular
apple throughout the Pennsylvania Dutch section, but never seems to have been good enough to extend its range.

The sad fact we must face is that, as in pears, we have let the gene pool grow limited. Intensive breeding primarily for commercial purposes, and the disappearance of home orchards may already have limited the possibilities for future development. Unless the apple is going to become a standardized mediocre fruit, the main emphasis on future development should be toward taste. What we need now are apples that will bear annually, keep well, ship well, look beautiful in a supermarket bin, and at the same time taste as good as a Northern Spy or a Spitzenburg. If we cannot do that, then we have failed.

And I must confess that I am equally worried over the modern practices of culture, once again geared only to commerce. Because labor is expensive and an apple grower wants to make money, he keeps down weeds with chemicals, kills the pests with chemicals, thins the fruit with chemicals. All of these go into the soil, thousands of tons of them annually. Who has studied the effect this may have on the soil of the future, on the drainage water of the future, on the water springs of the future, on the health of men in the future? Perhaps the apple growers and the university agronomists had better pay more attention to Rachel Carson

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Notes

The best source of information on old varieties of apples is The Apples of New York by S. A. Beach, published in Albany, N.Y., in 1905, as Part II of the Annual Report of the New York Agricultural Experimental Station for 1903.

The illustrations in this article are reproduced from Volumes I and II of the above.