

GROWING APPLES IN VERMONT

By BARBARA BELLOWS
*PROFESSOR OF HISTORY,
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE*

Apples are the most important fruit crop in Vermont. But apple trees have not always been part of the Vermont landscape. The French who lived on the shores of Lake Champlain in the 1600s planted the first apple trees in this area. Later settlers planted more. The warm days and cool nights of Vermont's summers made it a good place to grow apples. By 1800 almost every farm had an orchard.

In colonial times people did not always think of apples as something good to eat. Most apples then were small and hard and tasted bitter. Instead they were used to make apple cider and cider vinegar, as had been done in Europe for hundreds of years. The cider contained some alcohol and was thought to be a healthy drink. Apple brandy, a stronger version of cider, was also popular. George Washington liked apple brandy so much he had it made at Mount Vernon, his home in Virginia.

Apple cider was, for a while, Americans' favorite drink. Even children drank it. Many



Courtesy of Alyce Anderson

Diamond A Orchard, Shoreham, VT around 1920.

Vermonters made it at home. What they didn't drink they sold. Making cider became a good way to make money.

During the 1820s, however, some people decided that drinking alcohol was bad. They started the Temperance Movement and tried to have laws passed against making, selling, and drinking alcoholic beverages. In Vermont some wanted to cut down all the apple trees so no cider could be made. In 1810, before the Temperance Movement began, there were 125 distilleries in Vermont that made almost 175,000 gallons of cider a year. By 1840 there were only two.

But there were still all those apple trees. Many Vermont farmers fed their extra apples to their pigs. Many cut down their apple trees and turned their orchards into pastures or wheat fields.

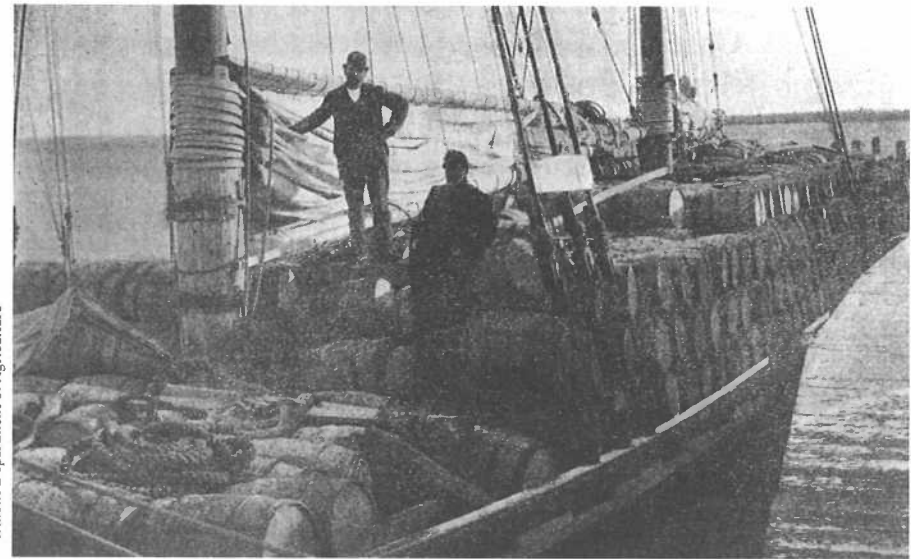
In the 1880s Vermont farmers were looking for new crops to grow. Some planted large apple orchards and hoped they would make a lot of money selling the fruit to markets in the big cities.

It is not easy to start an orchard. Trees that give good eating apples do not usually grow from seeds the way most flowers and vegetables do. Trees grown from apple seeds often produce fruit that is very different from the apple they came from. "They won't come true to themselves," as an apple grower once said. The

chance of getting good-tasting fruit from a tree grown from an apple seed is about 1 in 80,000!

To grow trees that give the same kind of apples orchardists take cuttings from trees that give good apples and attach—graft—them onto healthy root stock. The McIntosh apple is one of the most popular apples in North America and the one most grown in Vermont. Its growth was spread by cuttings from a single tree that grew on John McIntosh's farm in Ontario, Canada. When that tree died in 1910 a memorial to it was built on the place it had stood.

The new orchards were, by and large, bigger than the earlier ones. The largest one in Vermont, and maybe in all of New England, was Edward H. Everett's in Bennington. There were



Vermont Department of Agriculture

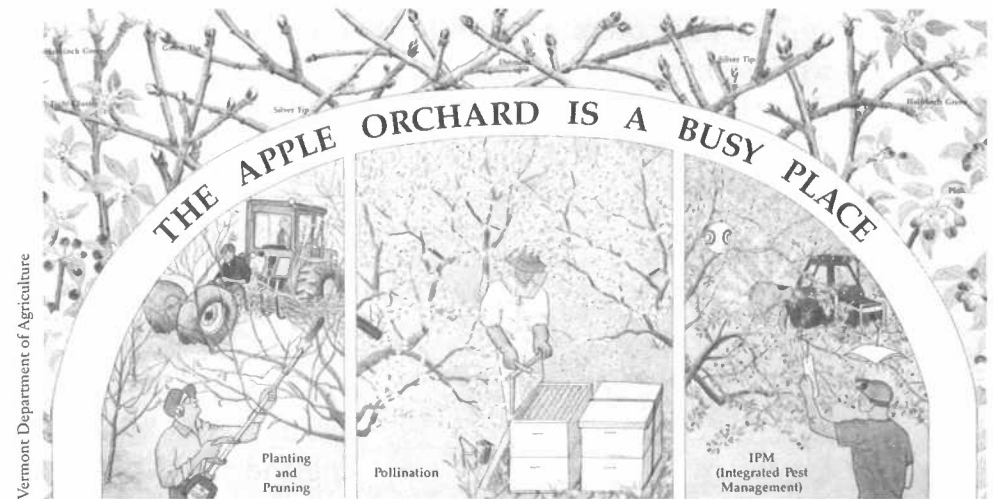
Apples on their way to market on Lake Champlain around 1896.

about 55,000 trees in it, some in rows almost a mile long.

At one time there were more than 1,000 different kinds of apples grown in Vermont. But when people started growing apples for market they grew only about 12 kinds. These were the apples with the nicest color and shape and the ones that lasted the longest. One kind, the Cortland apple, made so much money for its growers that it was called the “mortgage lifter.” Some say it is still the best apple for pies.

In the 1920s growers learned how to improve the quality of their apples and the size of their harvests. One of the first people in Vermont to use this new knowledge was William John Anderson, Jr. of Shoreham, in the Champlain Valley. Anderson’s father had been a slave in Virginia. During the Civil War he escaped and joined the soldiers of the 11th Vermont Infantry. One of the soldiers was from Shoreham. He urged Anderson’s father to think about moving to Vermont. He did, and William John Anderson, Jr. was born in Shoreham in 1876. In 1920 he started the Diamond A Orchard. The orchard did very well for a while, but it no longer exists.

People used to ask Anderson for advice on starting an apple orchard. “The only way to grow an apple orchard,” he’d say, “is with a lot of hard work.”



Orchardists work all year to produce their apples. In winter they prune the trees, cutting off branches that prevent sunlight from reaching all the fruit. In the spring they spray against insects and diseases that can harm the trees and the fruit. They go after the mice that eat bark and weaken the trees. They bring in hives of bees to fertilize the apple blossoms so that fruit will grow. They cut the grass around the trees and weed out dandelions that might draw the bees away from the apple blossoms.

In the fall the apples have to be picked by hand. Growers hire extra help to pick them. About 500 workers now come to Vermont every year just for this harvest. Some come from other states, some from other countries. The work is hard. Workers climb ladders to pick the fruit and carry heavy bags filled with

apples. They often work 70 hours a week. They work so hard because they are in a race against time. Five minutes of hail or an early hard frost can destroy a crop and leave apple growers with little to show for a whole year's work.



Vermont Department of Agriculture

Seasonal workers in the fields.

Most Vermont apples are shipped out of state to markets in New England and as far away as Florida. Some go to factories that make

apple juice and other apple products. Some are sold in markets and at roadside stands in Vermont. Others get made into fresh cider, a drink that contains no alcohol.

Vermont grows more than a million bushels of apples a year. Still, people don't buy as many as they used to. Apples are no longer the only fruit you can get in the winter in the colder states. And today's apples are not nearly so tasty as the ones our grandparents grew in their yards or bought at the farm stand. Now some Vermont orchardists are beginning to grow some of the old kinds of apples as well. When we eat them we are truly getting a taste of the past.

Rooting Around

There are abandoned orchards all over Vermont. Many towns have streets called "Orchard Lane" or "Orchard Street." There are also old cider mills and streets called "Cider Mill Road." What part did apples play in the history of your town?

If you like apples, try tasting different kinds. Some of the old kinds have wonderful names, like Winter Banana, Westfield Seek No Further, Chenango Strawberry, Maiden Blush, Irish Peach, Orange Pippin, and William's Pride. Can you find any of them?

