

# Johnny Appleseed in Pittsburgh\*

By E. John Long

Not far from the city of McKeesport, in the district known as Five Fields, a gnarled apple tree stump stands at the forks of two unimportant country roads. One of the roads winds northward from the forks, soon dons a modern brick coat and the prosaic name of Hartman street. Downhill it sweeps in the track of Braddock and Washington, passing the site of the last encampment of the ill-fated expedition of 1755.

The other fork turns in the opposite direction, through a forest of white beeches, pauses on a hillside of haw bushes, and finally drops down into Snake Hollow, in 1921 the bustling center of McKeesport's great natural gas boom, but today a quiet spot of rotting derrick timbers and rusting pipe lines.

Almost on the watershed between the two roads, a strategic spot for a memorial, the old apple tree stump basks in the light of the afternoon sun and the glory of local tradition. For here, romantic McKeesporters declare, is a relic of John Chapman, better known throughout the Ohio valley as Johnny Appleseed.

The hewed and hacked remnant of twisted stump does give the appearance of great age. Old timers recall the apple tree that stood there during their lifetimes. Some even recall the fruit it bore. But, whether it sprang from the deerskin seedbag of Johnny Appleseed, or whether it is but a chance sprouting of a casually tossed core, it serves to keep fresh the memory of an obscure but lovable character whose practical philanthropy has greatly enriched the legendary lore of the Pittsburgh district.

We of Western Pennsylvania have all our lives heard of Johnny Appleseed. Here and there we have bumped into bits of folklore and rare anecdotes of his crude but homely hospitality; of his gifts of apple seeds to westward trekking pioneers; of the orchards he cleared and planted; and of his voluntary missions of good will to the Indians.

\*From *The Adventures of Johnny Appleseed*. By Henry Chapin. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc. 1930. \$2.50.

But never have we had an opportunity to meet this legendary character; to understand the strange yearnings which drew him from his Connecticut home across the rude mountain trails to what was in 1793 the very rim of civilization's horizon.

Henry Chapin's "The Adventures of Johnny Appleseed" paints for us at last a full length portrait. With rare sympathy and a good deal of understanding Mr. Chapin gives us the man, and a vivid and colorful background of the life and customs of post-Revolutionary days in the country west of the Alleghenies. While the book is fictional in approach the incidents and settings possess a remarkable degree of authenticity. Not attempting to be a source reference, "The Adventures of Johnny Appleseed" is nevertheless a literary tidbit for the historian. Mr. Chapin has chosen wisely his medium in thus portraying a character which is such a strange mixture of the real and the legendary.

Left an orphan in his late 'teens Johnny decided that the age of commerce, which followed hard on the heels of the Revolution in Connecticut, was not for him. "Greed for land and lust for possessions filled men's thoughts. Even taxes were being raised by public lotteries. Time to be off", the youthful Yankee told himself. "I'd best see what the ax-men are doing in the Alleghenies."

He himself, at the time, probably could not have explained in words just why he had to take up the trail. Certainly he had no inkling of the part he was going to play in the great drama being staged along the Ohio frontier.

In reply to the question of a friend, he says, "Ever since I was a little boy, something in my blood has made me want to go west and keep on going until I found the very edge of things. This isn't the edge. I want to help plant the wilderness. It isn't much, but it's what I was born for. Nothing else matters. You have to aim at something and stick to it. It makes you happy. I am to be a planter."

Johnny Appleseed, sharing the driver's seat of a Conestoga freight wagon with one Pat Neal, a rollicking Irish boss driver, approached Pittsburgh over the old northern branch of the Raystown Path, parts of which are

now the Lincoln Highway, through Carlisle, then Fort Ligonier, and on to Greensburg. Finally Pittsburgh!

"The year Johnny came west the point of land between the two rivers, which was Pittsburgh, showed the ruin of the two disputed forts, Duquesne and Pitt," says the author. "The walls of the expensive Fort Pitt were hauled off to make houses and boat-yards by the newcomers, many of whom had never heard the war whoop of an Indian."

Johnny was a bit bewildered when the freight wagon finally dropped him at "the tavern of the negro Richards on Ferry street." He had reached his objective, and with no further plans at the moment, he was suddenly at a loss as to what he should do next. He found lodging at "the house of a Madame Grenadier, a hearty, worldly wise woman well past middle age," and he was safe enough under her roof when the mob of John Holcroft, called Tom the Tinker, took the town during the Whiskey Rebellion.

When things settled down Johnny Appleseed found his first job in the new country. He became a shipwright and helped to construct many of the early rafts and river scows that carried settlers the next stage of their journeys westward. "He decided that ten years of Pittsburgh life was worth a hundred on the Connecticut."

Johnny was to live in Pittsburgh twelve years, from 1794 to 1806. "He became a westerner. He felt time rolling by at a pace, and great things preparing.

"Here it is that Johathan Chapman ceased to exist, and a new man with strange far-away ideas in his head came to life, a man people called Johnny Appleseed. Not quickly, by no stroke of lightning! Johnny Appleseed had been forming a long time in the shell of young Chapman . . . . For twelve years Pittsburgh swallowed him up, but Johnny also swallowed Pittsburgh and all the meaning of life it could teach him. He worked in the shipyards along the Monongahela. When he wanted to think, he worked with his hands at some tasks he loved, and by-and-by, the idea he wanted came uncalled for out of the thin air and he knew what he wanted."

And so, although he also knew in his heart that some day he would slide out upon the current of the Ohio and go on and down into the greater wilderness, he built himself a log home on a grassy rise of ground called Grant's Hill.

Here was a clear spring. He never could accustom himself to drinking the muddy river waters. When the apple orchards came into bloom Johnny would walk along the Allegheny through the overgrown trees of the King's Orchard, or get work helping to tend the better kept trees belonging to General O'Hara. Gradually came the idea of an orchard for himself with plenty of good seed for the people who could take it on into new places. Always within him Johnny harbored the feeling that his mission in life was to serve his fellow man in quiet ways, without ostentation.

It was not long before the home of an eccentric but kindly man, whom the natives always called Johnny Applesed, became known to the weary and the shelterless. His home was not a tavern; it was a way-station for the stranger in want. A cow, a garden, and his trees and beehives satisfied his wants, and there was always plenty to spare for all who would stop at his door. All he would take in exchange were articles of cast-off clothing. His dress began to look a little queer in time, but this didn't bother him, nor did it affect his cheerful good nature.

Years sped by and Johnny Applesed became an institution in the pioneer parade. Always hospitality reigned at his cabin; always there was a handful of apple seeds to speed the parting guest. But Pittsburgh was growing. Life was getting just a little bit too easy. Eastern civilization was creeping over the mountains, catching up with Johnny Applesed. He wanted to rejoin his own people and renew his sense of hardship.

One day in June 1806 Johnny made a sort of craft by lashing two dugouts side by side. The best of his supply of applesed he put into deerskin bags and placed them in the bottom of his boat. He gave his house, his orchard and his garden patch to a widow with three children, and, with a negro boy helper, pushed off into the sparkling waters of the Ohio.

At Marietta he found his fame had preceeded him. Commander Whipple of Fort Harmer turned out the entire garrison to plow up orchard land for Johnny to plant. Pushing up the Muskingum he established another plantation at Black Forks. Then along the Sandusky Trail, beyond the pioneer outposts, he made friends with the Indians,

nursed their sick children, and gave them apple trees. Unarmed he boldly stalked the country, and his name came to be a marvel to the frontier folk who lived balanced between life and death.

During the War of 1812, when the borderlands seethed with conflict between whites and redmen, Johnny Appleseed moved unmolested. He tried to make peace in vain, but his scalp alone of all the whites was not desired by hostile Indians. After the war he again moved down the Ohio, in the vanguard of the pioneers, planting apple seeds as he went. But Johnny Appleseed, hardy frontiersman that he was, could not go on forever. At the home of his friend William Watt, of Fort Wayne, he finally took sick and died, of all places for one who has survived so many dangers, in bed.

While Mr. Chapin's book might please the student of history better if he had given us a work entirely non-fictional and had supported his statements with references to sources, he has nevertheless cleared a good deal of the mist that has surrounded this lovable St. Francis of the wilderness. His book is a distinct contribution to the folklore of the Pittsburgh district.