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WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Rediscovering the apple harvest heritage

Holly Kays Special to the Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

Growing up in Swain County, North Carolina, Nathan Dee Greene ate a lot of apples. The family had several trees of their own, but every fall, they bought bushels from the nearby orchard on Laurel Branch, across the Tuckasegee River from Great Smoky Mountains National Park. “My mother would go all day, and she’d pick up the apples in a tote bag, and after school, I would go over and get them and sled them home,” said Greene in an archived interview. Now deceased, he was nearly 86 when he spoke with Nathan Somers in 2004 for the conversation now catalogued as part of Western Carolina University’s Oral Histories of Western North Carolina project.

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An apple ripens on a tree at The Purchase, which was formerly farmed by the Ferguson family. PHOTO BY MICHELE SONS/PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE

Trump vows further migrant crackdown

Taylor Ardrey, Thao Nguyen and Doyle Rice
USA TODAY

President Donald Trump said Nov. 27 that U.S. Army Spc. Sarah Beckstrom, of the West Virginia National Guard, died after being shot the previous day in an ambush near the White House, a shooting that drew claims from his administration of Biden-era immigration vetting failures and prompted a sweeping review of asylum cases. Beckstrom, 20, died of her wounds, and U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe, 24, was “fighting for his life,” Trump announced Nov. 27, as investigators conducted what officials said was a terrorism investigation after the shooting.

“Sarah Beckstrom of West Virginia, one of the guardsmen that we’re talking about, highly respected, young, magnificent person, started service in June of 2023, outstanding in every way. She’s just passed away,” Trump said in a Thanksgiving call to service members from Palm Beach, Florida. “She’s no longer with us.” Beckstrom, from Summersville, West Virginia, was assigned to the 863rd Military Police Company, 11th Engineer Brigade, and entered service in June 2023, according to a news release from the West Virginia National Guard. Wolfe, of Martinsburg, West Virginia, was assigned to the Force Support Squadron, 167 Airlift

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Council removes ‘combative’ planning commissioner

Will Hofmann
Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - City Manager Debra Campbell sent a memo to City Council in early November outlining a series of incidents related to a Planning and Zoning Commissioner who is described as “combative,” exhibiting a “failure to maintain decorum” during city meetings. The memo said he contributed to resignations on the commission and affected the “integrity, safety, and public trust” of one of the most important advisory boards in the city. Though council members have not publicly commented on the memo, it was provided as background to City Council’s Nov. 18 vote to remove Jared Wheatley from the Planning and Zoning Commission — a rare move to fire a volunteer adviser from their appointed board. Wheatley, the owner of a construction company and a member of the Asheville Downtown Association Board of Directors, had been appointed to the Planning and Zoning Commission on Oct. 10, 2023. His term was set to expire on August 14, 2026. He was removed from the Planning and Zoning Commission in a 5-2 vote, with council members Antanette Mosley and Kim Roney voting against the motion. The Citizen Times reached out to Mayor Esther Manheimer, Roney and Mosley for comment. Wheatley, who did not address the allegations when asked by the Citizen Times Nov. 24 to respond to the memo and removal, said he felt the process lacked transparency. The Planning and Zoning Commission is among the most powerful volunteer advisory boards in the city and one of the few required to regularly meet after Tropical Storm Helene resulted in the significant restructuring of city boards. Most boards will only meet “as needed” in the future, the Citizen Times reported.

The commission gives recommendations on conditional zoning projects — typically the largest projects to go through city planning processes — and approves smaller housing developments and projects, including those going through the city of Asheville hotel overlay. The commission also provides input on policy changes for the city’s Unified Development Ordinance. City advisory boards are guided by a member handbook, which outlines ethics, conduct and harassment policies. The vote was first publicly mentioned during an Oct. 23 City Council agenda briefing, when staff were directed to provide council with “more information” on the vote, Mayor Esther Manheimer said at the time.

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Jared Wheatley, the owner of a construction company and a member of the Asheville Downtown Association Board of Directors, was removed from the city of Asheville Planning and Zoning Commission Nov. 18.
ANGELA WILHELM/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES



Apple

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“At that time the roads in this community, there was only sled roads; it was very small and very narrow and therefore it wasn't big enough for a wagon. And you used sleds back then all the time.”

Whether fresh from the tree, sun-dried, sulfur-treated, or preserved as apple butter, cider, brandy, or vinegar, the apple was a beloved staple in the days before refrigeration and global distribution networks. The versatile fruit thrived in the cool mountain climate, playing an important role in farms and communities throughout the Smoky Mountain region.

“The real benefit to those farm families having apples is that they last for a long time in root cellars,” said Jesse Webster, a forester with Great Smoky Mountains National Park. “Cool, rock-sided apple barns could house those apples throughout the fall, throughout the winter, into the spring of the next year.”

The rocky remains of these structures are still scattered throughout the park, along with aged apple trees still clinging to life in the shade of the surrounding forest. Since 2019, Webster and his colleagues have been engaged in a project seeking to save these living remnants of the park's cultural heritage.

“We’re protecting what we have on the landscape, because it helps connect the story that we’re telling,” Webster said. “It’s that link to the past.”

According to idiom, nothing is as American as apple pie. But the apple, like the forebears of most Americans, is an immigrant, originating half a world away in Kazakhstan. The wild crabapples that are the ancestors of all modern apple trees were first cultivated 8,000 years ago. Since then, they have traveled the world, with thousands of varieties bred for attributes like crispness, sweetness, and suitability for baking or long storage. Apples first arrived in the Americas sometime in the 1500s, with Native peoples as well as European settlers further adapting them to their own purposes.

“It’s pretty fascinating if you think about how apple trees have changed over time,” said Interpretive Park Ranger Michael Smith, who manages the Mountain Farm Museum adjacent to Oconaluftee Visitor Center and the eight apple trees in its orchard.

The oldest apple trees known to exist within the National Park Service are on The Purchase, an area of the Smokies in Haywood County, North Carolina, that was added to the park in the 1990s. For about a century, this mountain was home to the Ferguson family, who cleared the land for livestock and agriculture—including apple trees, which thrived at the 5,000-foot elevation.

Today, more than 30 apple trees persist on The Purchase, and though they’re now more than 125 years old and have gone decades without human care, they’re still healthy. To keep them that way, in 2022 Webster and his crew cleared out nearby trees that were shading out the apples and began to prune and mow around the neglected fruit trees. Now, said Webster, “they’re really looking great.”

The next step was to identify the trees. Historically, at least 16,000 types of apples were grown in the United States, but as fewer people kept orchards and suitability for storage and global transport networks grew in importance, many cultivars became either extinct or extremely rare. Cameron Peace, a professor of tree fruit genetics at Washington State University, estimated that fewer than half of these historic varieties still exist. Many of the names Greene mentioned in his interview—Hog Sweet, Winter John, Sheep’s Nose, Rusty Colt, Yellow Pippin, and Nonesuch—are unfamiliar to today’s apple eaters.

Identifying rare apple trees was once an arcane and time-intensive art, but the advent of rapid and inexpensive DNA testing has made it much easier. The park partnered with Peace, who runs a fruit tree identification project called MyFruitTree, to test six trees at The Purchase.

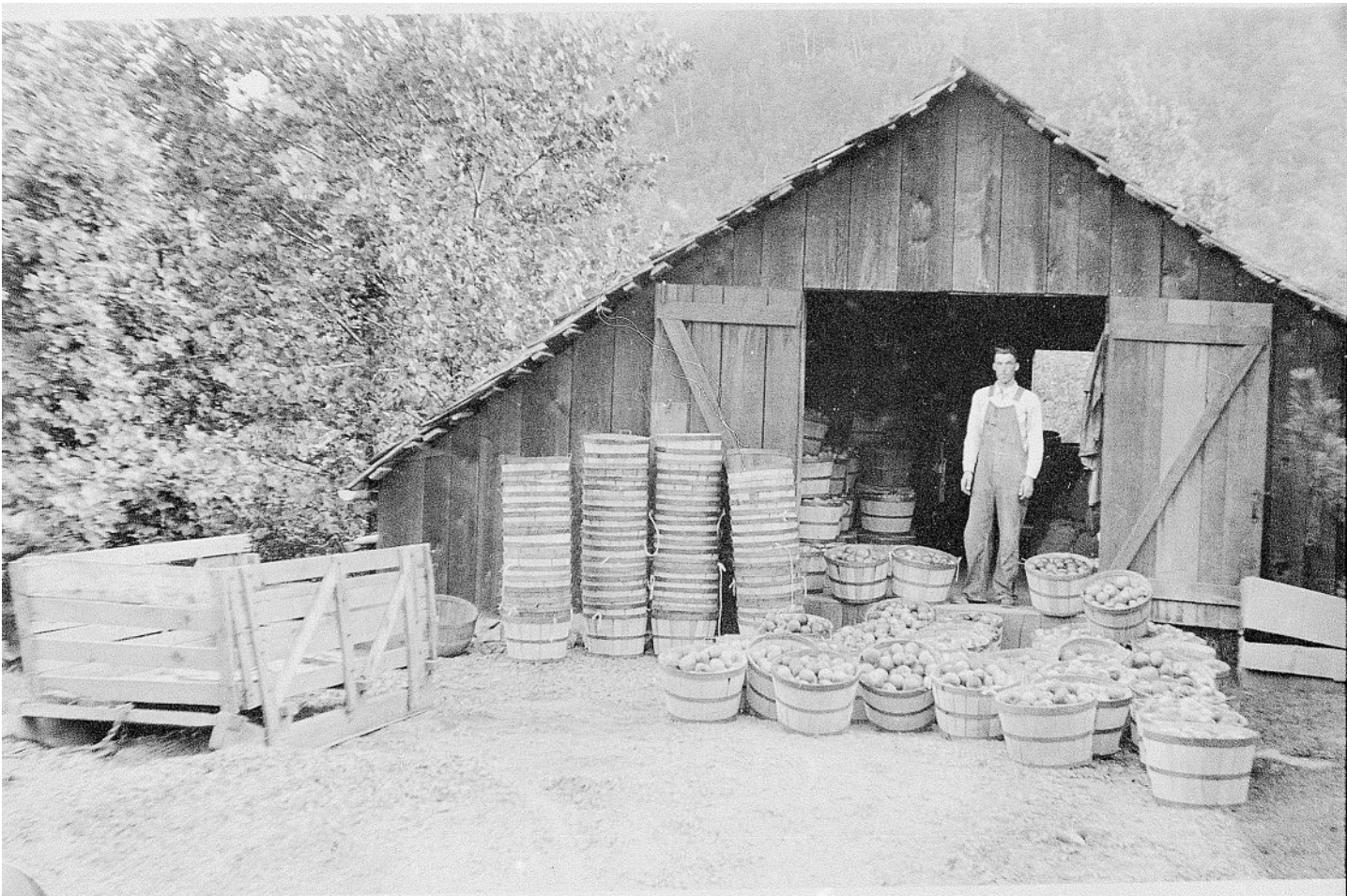
Results showed that one of the trees was a *Magnum Bonum*, an apple common in the South through the 1930s. Nurseries dubbed it “the king of all fall apples,” according to the Southern Heritage Apple Orchard’s Apple Index; the fruit had white flesh sometimes stained red near the skin, and in taste it was “tender, juicy, fine-grained, aromatic, and mildly subacid.”

Most apple trees are actually a combination of two separate trees—the root stock, which determines how tall the tree will grow, and the scion, which determines what kind of fruit the tree will produce. Instead of using seeds, orchardists typically graft a scion of their desired cultivar onto a root stock, ensuring that the exact genetics of the desired



Originally located in the Little Cataloochee area of Haywood County, the Will Messer apple barn is now located at the Mountain Farm Museum in Swain County adjacent to an orchard of heirloom apple varieties planted in the 1990s.

HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE



Cliff Oakley manages his 1930 harvest at his apple barn at Twin Creeks. Farmers used barns like this to store apples prior to sale or consumption. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



More than 30 apple trees persist on The Purchase, remaining healthy despite being well over 100 years old and going many decades without proper care. Since 2019, the park has been working to preserve and identify these trees.

MICHELE SONS/ SMOKIES LIFE

cultivar are preserved.

DNA tests showed that the other five trees were the offspring of two different types of apples, indicating that, rather than growing from carefully grafted seedlings, they had likely been incidental plantings, sprouting up from a fallen apple left decaying on the ground. Identifying the trees’ parents could uncover the likely identities of older trees that have long since vanished from the Ferguson orchard.

“There are millions of trees out there, and we aren’t going to value them if we don’t know much about them,” said Peace. “If you know the name, it connects you with all the other stories, all the people who have ever grown it and enjoyed it and talked about it and written about it. It brings you into the big story. Otherwise, it’s just an orphan out there.”

Though local lore held that most of the Fergusons’ trees had been Limbertwigs, only one of the five trees tested had a type of Limbertwig as one of its parents. Another was the offspring of a Tolman Sweet, and two more a Ben Davis. Two of the trees had the same mys-

tery cultivar as a parent. The trees’ DNA matched a sample held by the Temperate Orchard Conservancy in Oregon labeled as “Pittsburg,” but Peace has not yet been able to confirm whether the Pittsburg label itself is correct. Three more parents remain a mystery.

“Some of these trees we’re finding at Purchase Knob might be rediscovered varieties,” Webster said.

The Purchase is not the only place in the park with old apple trees. Webster is working to find and identify additional trees, now awaiting results on 15 specimens that have been sampled at Cades Cove, Cataloochee, Smokemont, and a high-elevation site along Kuwohi Road. Webster expects to finish assessing the park’s apple trees by spring 2026.

Though he anticipates finding plenty more apple trees that have persisted, overlooked, in previously inhabited areas of the park, there’s already an easy way for visitors to experience the Smokies’ apple harvest history. At the Mountain Farm Museum next to Oconaluftee Visitor Center, eight apple trees grow inside a high fence—erected in 2015 to protect the trees from elk—next

to an apple barn that once stood on a farm in Little Cataloochee.

“For us here in the park, we’re not intensive like you’d see on commercial orchards,” Smith said. “We don’t treat trees or spray trees for insects. We don’t use any fungicide. We let them be more natural, a little less input. We don’t fertilize.”

Every year, Smith and his colleagues prune the trees and assess their condition. Most of the easy-to-reach apples end up being picked by visitors, but any that remain are either fed to the farm’s pigs and chickens or used as educational tools at the annual Mountain Life Festival, held at the farm each September.

“You have to decide what the purpose and the goal for your orchard is,” Smith said. “For us, it’s to have trees and a small orchard and produce some apples, but also to talk about why those apples were important to people.”

In every apple is a taste of history—and a mouthful of possibilities. Old apple trees like those found in the Smokies offer the potential not only to resurrect historic varieties, but to create new ones.

“Anyone can cross anything with anything,” Peace said. “The more people are doing that, the more we are recreating that diversity that used to exist. A lot of that crossing has already been done by nature itself, and so you can just go out and find these old trees, and if they’ve got some really great attributes, then bang—there’s a potential new cultivar.”

Do you have an old apple tree on your property? Learn how to get its DNA tested by MyFruitTree.org .

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.