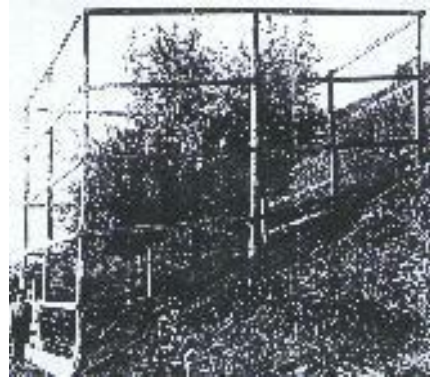


Fall 1995

The Golden Delicious Apple



Original Tree - Date Unknown

STRIKING GOLD IN THE CLAY COUNTY HILLS

"Eureka! I found it!" Those were the words of Paul Stark of Stark Brothers Nursery when he bit into a new and exciting apple in 1914.

He found that special apple on a thousand-mile treasure hunt which started in the town of Louisiana, Missouri, the home of Stark Brothers, and ended on a hillside in Clay County, West Virginia. The apple, later to be called the Golden Delicious, has become our state's most famous contribution to horticulture.

Truly there was gold found in the hills of West Virginia on that special day. The offspring of the original Golden Delicious tree have dropped wealth in every area of the United States and on every continent of the world. Over the years the Golden Delicious has become a standard in commercial and backyard orchards. There is a piece of West Virginia in all parts of the world, due to the popularity of this apple found as a chance seedling on a small farm in Clay County.

No one, at the time the Golden Delicious was discovered, had ever set eyes on such an apple. Red apples dominated at the turn of the century. The new tree soon changed that. It bore huge yellow apples. And yes, they were delicious. "With one in your hand, you can't be sure whether you're drinking champagne or eating an apple," Stark enthused.

Others were similarly impressed. Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, founder of the Kellogg's breakfast food company, wrote in a letter to Stark Nurseries, "I consider the Golden Delicious the finest apple I have ever tasted." Kellogg, an ardent health food proponent, was preparing to plant an orchard on his property.

Luther Burbank concurred. "After observing the Golden Delicious in my experiment grounds and giving it careful tests, I have no hesitancy in stating that it is the greatest apple in all the world," the legendary plant breeder reported.

Paul Stark set out to find the tree in the fall of 1914, the next bearing season after he first tasted a sample of the fruit. What he later called the "trail of the Golden Delicious Apple" ended at the small hamlet of Odessa, several miles south of the Elk River, near the Clay - Kanawha line.

Bewel Mullins had previously owned the Odessa farm, 36 acres located on a hill by Porter Creek. Mullins and his wife Nancy and three children lived there. "My father was a farmer and cattle driver in the area. He would herd cattle to market and to other farms," remembered Roberta Mullins McQuain, Bewel's daughter who now lives in Charleston.

Bewel is the West Virginian who came to be most closely associated with the Golden Delicious tree, but he didn't occupy the farm at the time of the grand discovery. Anderson Mullins, (Bewel's brother) became the tenant of the former Bewel Mullins farm and he was a true apple lover. For several years Anderson had bought his apple stock from Stark Brothers Nursery. At that time, Stark was the major commercial mail-order company for fruit trees, known throughout the country by its advertising.

Anderson Mullins was alive and active in the early years of the 20th century. It was the fall of 1905 when he first noticed a bumper crop of yellow apples burdening a tree he knew hadn't been planted in the home orchard and which must have grown from seed. For the next nine years he marveled at the mysterious tree's ability to produce when other trees didn't. Also remarkable was the apple's ability to keep fresh and crisp in storage until late spring.

Anderson Mullins knew he had something special. Figuring that his favorite nursery might be interested, he proceeded to send Stark Brothers samples of the fruit of his "Mullins Yellow Seedling." "Anderson sent us three apples and a modest letter explaining its characteristics," according to Paul Stark, Jr.

Because of the Starks' love of red apples and the fact that yellow apples had never been best sellers, Paul Stark, Sr., wasn't especially optimistic when the West Virginia fruit arrived in Missouri. But when the Clay County apples were sliced, Paul and his brother Lloyd couldn't believe their taste buds. "We had never experienced such a spicy flavor before, especially from a yellow apple," Paul Stark afterwards reported.

So Anderson Mullins definitely got the attention of Stark Brothers Nursery with his three apples. In a 1964 article titled "The Golden Apple" Paul Stark, Jr., wrote of what happened next: "There was only one way to get from Louisiana, Missouri, to West Virginia and that was by railroad and horse and buggy. For a thousand miles, Paul Stark, Sr., traveled by rail. The final 25 miles was on horseback to a point on Porter's Creek called Odessa."

"When he arrived at the Anderson Mullins farm, he knocked on the cabin door, but nobody answered. He then decided to look around, going up on the hill behind the cabin where a small orchard was planted."

Let's pick up the story now in the words of Paul, Sr., as quoted in a company catalog: "There, looming forth in the midst of small leafless barren trees, was one tree with rich green foliage as if it had been transplanted from the Garden of Eden. That tree's boughs were bending to the ground beneath a tremendous crop of great, glorious, glowing golden apples."

"I started for it on the run, a fear bothered me. Suppose it's just a Grimes Golden apple after all. I came closer and saw the apples were 50 percent larger than Grimes Golden. I picked one and bit into its crisp, tender, juice-laden flesh. Eureka! I had found it!"

A mountain farmer appeared just as the Missourian was enjoying his apple. Stark identified himself, saying, "That's some apple."

"Name's Mullins," the man said, "I sent you some."

After meeting in the orchard, Paul Stark and Anderson Mullins sat down to make their business arrangements. Taking no chances, Stark ordered the tree enclosed before he returned to Missouri.

"Several accounts exist as to what Anderson Mullins got for his special tree," retired Clay County Extension Agent Paul Allen recently told me. "The general consensus was that he was paid at least \$5,000." Some members of the Mullins family recall that the tree was actually rented for \$5,000 and then purchased for an additional \$5,000.

When Stark left the Mullins farm that historic day in 1914, he took with him a bundle of scion wood to graft to his apple trees back in Missouri. It was only two years after the grafts were complete and had produced a crop of yellow apples that he gave his new apple the name "Golden Delicious." No doubt he hoped to capitalize on the comparison to the popular Red Delicious, another Stark apple.

Shortly after Anderson sold the rights to the Golden Delicious apple to Stark Brothers Nursery, Bewel and Anderson Mullins agreed to swap farms. It was Bewel who was paid by Stark Brothers to maintain the original Golden Delicious for the next 30 years.

For protection against thieves, Stark had had a 30 by 30-foot cage constructed out of wood and woven wire that completely engulfed the tree. "Dad had an electric alarm on the cage to detect intruders," Mrs. McQuain recalled. "The alarm wires stretched from the tree's cage behind the house to an alarm in the kitchen."

The 900-square-foot area was bought by Stark Brothers, and the deed still rests in the Clay County Courthouse. Paul Allen figures it was "the most valuable piece of real estate of its size in West Virginia."

The mother tree produced quality apples for nearly 50 years. The seedling had sprouted around the turn of the century, and apparently the old tree had borne its last apple and died by the late 1950's.

Paul Allen corroborates that approximate date. He remembers November 6, 1958, when he and WVU professors Joseph Barrat and David Quinn scaled the hillside behind the old Mullins home. They were in search of any remains of the famous Golden Delicious tree. "Hopefully we could find living shoots so that we could propagate directly from the original tree," Paul recently recalled.

"We went through a dilapidated gate supporting a rusty fence. The original tree was there but it showed no signs of life," Paul continued. David Quinn took a few pictures of the dead tree and later sketched its final image in a pen-and-ink drawing.

Nowadays the only evidence that the tree of gold grew up the hill from Porter Creek is an historical marker located on Route 1 nearby. But the old tree did its job in bringing one of the great, good things into the world. And even though the original stands no more, one only has to visit the nearest supermarket to get a delicious reminder of the famous apple born in Clay County.

Each fall, Clay County celebrates its famous apple with the annual Clay County Golden Delicious Festival. The first festival, in 1973, featured country-and-western star Tex Ritter as the grand marshal. That first year the "world's largest apple pie" was baked, measuring a whopping six feet across and filled with spicy, juicy Golden Delicious apples.

The above is a condensation of an article entitled "The Greatest Apple in the World: Striking Gold in the Clay County Hills," that appeared in the Fall 1995 issue of Goldenseal magazine published by the Division of Culture and History of the State of West Virginia. The article was written by John L. Marra.