

# History of Iowa's Original Hawkeye Apple



Started as a small insignificant Seedling in Jesse Hiatt's Peru, Iowa orchard, about 1870, the original Delicious tree was not welcomed or heralded as the beginning of an apple that in time would be said to represent the crowning point of achievement in the origination of American varieties. On the contrary, Mr. Hiatt twice unceremoniously cut down the young tree because it was not in the row.

With an urge to fulfill its destiny, this hardy child pushed its way into the world again, larger than before. And Jesse, a man of patience and persistence himself, with a natural sympathy for anything that could withstand adversity, felt compassion for this struggling, youngster.

"If thee must live, thee may," the Quaker said, trimming some of the branches, and cutting off the top to encourage growth and proper form.

Because the sturdy sprout was growing near an old Yellow Bellflower tree, Hiatt surmised that the latter might be one of the parents, and he wondered what kind of fruit the seedling would bear. He had always enjoyed experimenting and had made a practice of grafting several varieties on one tree. He had two very good apple varieties of his own, the Hiatt Sweet and the Hiatt Black.

The Bellflower fruit was attractive, of good quality, with a peculiar long pointed shape terminating in five points at the blossom end. Because of these unusual characteristics he was convinced that any offspring of the Bellflower would surely produce fruit with similar attributes.

For the next several years he carefully tended and cared for the tree. When the tree was 10 years old, Jesse was delighted to discover his new tree was boasting a blossom cluster. By harvest time there was one apple which had hung tenaciously to the limb until maturity. Jesse admired the beautiful flashing strawberry color streaked with lines of darker red. He was now certain that this seedling was a progeny of the old Bellflower tree for, even though the color differed for this new apple it had the same unusual shape, and the five points on the end were even more prominent than those on the Bellflower fruit. Taking out his pocket knife he carefully pared the one and only apple. What would it taste like? In great excitement, Jesse told his wife, "Ma, this is the best apple in the whole world!" He never changed his mind.

Years later many people expressed the same opinion, including A.J. Mason, former President of the Hood River, Oregon Apple Growers' Union who said, "It is the best flavored apple I have ever tasted." E.P. Powell, a veteran fruit grower in many parts of the United States from New York to Florida, and the author of "The Orchard and Fruit Garden", said "It is most prominent, for both beauty and quality, for its bearing capacity,



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and its ability to win the favor of cook as well as prince. All hail Delicious, noblest apple in the world today!"



One would think that an apple which later proved to be so truly delightful to the eye and palate would have gained instant acclaim, but the life of the Delicious from the start hung virtually by a thread. What if the seedling, after being cut down, had not sprouted the third time? If Jesse Hiatt had not been prompted by sympathy to allow the seedling a place in his orchard, the Delicious apple would have

remained unknown. Getting a safe spot to spread its roots was only one of the necessary factors for the success of Delicious seedling, and even though Jesse made this possible, there were still the hazards of weather to face. When the tree trunk was six inches in diameter, the top was blown to the northeast, leaving the body exposed to sun and wind. It became affected by sunscald, the bark cracked and began to peel off. Determined to save his tree, which he now called the Hawkeye, Hiatt fastened a heavy cover about the body, and kept it on for many years.

However, the destiny of the apple fit for the Gods still tottered precariously in their laps. There was no doubt in Jesse's mind that his Hawkeye with its superb flavor and good characteristics was indeed the best in the world. But how could he convince the people? He sent exhibits of his apple to the Iowa fairs, but they were scarcely noticed. Established varieties took the blue ribbons.

When he tried to persuade his friend, Judge W. H. Lewis, a nurseryman of nearby Winterset, that it would be profitable for him to graft and sell the trees, the nurseryman failed to see any future in Hiatt's apple.

Jesse carried his apples wherever he went in an effort to bring the fruit into public focus, but this availed him nothing but a remark from the Winterset News publisher to the effect that Jesse was batty and the apple no good. By this time many persons would have been ready to give up and the world would never have known the apple which in later years was said by Luther Burbank to be "the best in quality of any apple which I have so far tested."

But undaunted after 11 years of promotion, and still convinced that he had the world's best apple, Hiatt sent four apples in 1893 to a fruit show being held in Louisiana, Mo. This show was sponsored by Stark Nurseries and exhibits of new fruits from all over America and abroad were invited. Prizes were offered for the best, promising, high quality, heavy producing fruits. Here, at last the Hawkeye was to receive attention. When the judges beheld the plate of beautiful, long shaped, highly flavored fruit with their five distinctive points at one end, only first place was good enough for such an apple. Taking his first bite of the apple to judge its quality, Clarence M. Stark, President of Stark Nurseries, exclaimed, "My that's Delicious -and that's the name for it." Mr. Stark habitually carried a little red book in his pocket in which he jotted down appropriate names for new fruit varieties as they occurred to him. For years he had retained the name Delicious for a fruit worthy of the superb title, and here was the apple for which he had been waiting. Where had it come from, and who was the exhibitor? No one could furnish the answers. In the confusion of the show, the name and address of the sender



*Provided Courtesy of Trapple Orchard*

had been lost. Fate had dealt another blow to Jesse Hiatt's hopes for recognition of his Hawkeye.

But luckily for the apple lovers of the world, this old Quaker had early learned the importance of patience and persistence, and he awaited another opportunity to exhibit the apple of his eye. The wheel of fortune was turning, and in Missouri Mr. Stark, having recognized in this winner a potential to revolutionize the apple industry, decided to repeat the Apple Show and Fruit Fair the following year with the hope that the owner of this magnificent fruit would enter it again.

As opening day for the 1894 Show approached, the interested parties eagerly opened and examined each entry as it arrived, searching for the fabulous apple from the unknown exhibitor. At last on the very day the Fair opened, a barrel was received which bore a return tag addressed to Jesse Hiatt, Peru, Iowa. The barrel top was quickly removed, exposing the beautiful apples with their streaked strawberry colors, the precious fruit which Hiatt had refused to allow to remain insignificant and unknown.

To such a tenuous thread of circumstance and chance, the Delicious clung and won its right to be called the greatest red apple of the world, the forerunner of a major segment, as well as the backbone, of the vast apple industry of America today.

Excitedly Stark wrote to Hiatt to learn more about the apple and the history of the tree. In answer Jesse wrote, in part, "I am nearly 70 years old and have raised apples all my life and would not willingly overestimate this apple for 40 such varieties, but if it is not a better apple than any in your long list, it will cost you nothing. I have never seen a man taste it but who says it is the best apple he ever saw. It hangs on the tree as well as Ben Davis, keeps as well, is a good shipper, is as large, of finer color. The tree is as strong a grower and very hardy. It bears young and bears every year. Once you introduce it, there will be little call for Jonathan. The tree is similar to Winesap, except branches are stronger and need little or no pruning. Both tree and fruit are perfect models. The tree is strong, has finely molded limbs, which are adapted to bearing great weights of fruit. It does not succumb to blight and never shows any signs of tenderness. During the last eight years, drought and cold have killed three-fifths of my orchard up here in Iowa, but



this tree has withstood it all. It is praised by all who have tasted it, and it has a peculiar quality which cannot be surpassed or described and has a delicious fragrance. It is brilliant red in color, often mingled with gold near the blossom end. All declare it to be the best apple in the world."

After correspondence with Jesse, Stark boarded a train for Peru, Iowa to personally inspect the tree which was now so very important. He found that it possessed the necessary attributes, and he purchased the propagating rights. Not wishing to wait the usual length of time required to introduce a new variety to the public, the Starks sent as gifts a few Delicious trees with each order being sent all over the country, gambling on the chance that they would produce in different regions. The gamble paid off, and in a few years they were flooded by letters from people in all parts of the country asking the name of the apple which tasted like no



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other they had eaten, and requesting more trees to plant.

The adaptability of the Delicious to grow in a variety of climates caused Richard Dalton, President of the Missouri State Board of Horticulture to say that it "may be profitably grown in any climate where the apple is at all at home." For 40 years a successful, progressive, practical fruit grower, whose unceasing efforts toward the betterment of horticulture have been of inestimable value to the orchardists of the land, Dalton went on retained in the trees propagated from the original one.

Some individuals think the flesh of Richared is finer in texture and whiter in color than the original Delicious but persons, who are very exacting in their tastes, still prefer the original Delicious. However, the average person would probably be unable to make any distinction. It colors nearly all Extra Fancy Grade, and the keeping qualities are excellent. Though the honor came 27 years after its sister, Starking, had received the award, Richared also earned the Wilder Medal in 1953 as a very outstanding strain of Delicious

Richared became popular because of its rich blush color, and was widely planted. It has been one of the leading strains of Delicious and is well known in many foreign countries. However, in the United States, it has gracefully abdicated the throne to its daughter, Royal Red Delicious, and thus the saying, "One that follows shall be greater than the last," continues to unfold with each new discovery in the apple kingdom.

*Story courtesy of the author*



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