

## ***FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE***

***For the week of: September 19, 2011***

***American Farm Bureau Federation***

### **Agriculture's Folk Hero**

*By Stewart Truelsen*

America has a fondness for folk heroes, some real, some fictional, like Paul Bunyan, the giant lumberjack; frontiersmen Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone; Casey Jones, the brave engineer; Pecos Bill, the cowboy who rode a tornado; and of course Johnny Appleseed, the itinerant nurseryman.

Ironically, Johnny Appleseed is perhaps the most-celebrated but least heroic. He was nothing like Daniel Boone who killed a bear with his bare hands, as the story goes. Today, Boone would be in trouble for that feat with fish and game officers and animal rights activists.

Appleseed, on the other hand, wouldn't harm a mosquito. He put out his campfire at night so insects wouldn't be drawn into the flames.

Johnny Appleseed is one of the real folk heroes. His real name was John Chapman. He was born around the time of the Revolutionary War and is thought to be buried at Ft. Wayne, Ind. Johnny Appleseed catapulted to folk hero status in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was rediscovered by Walt Disney and remains a popular character in children's books.

One could consider him an agriculturalist because he planted orchards on America's early frontier, largely around Ohio and Pennsylvania. But he was a very strange fellow according to a new biography, *Johnny Appleseed, The Man, the Myth, the American Story* by Howard Means.

Chapman usually went barefoot and wore odd headgear, including a pyramid of hats, one of which was a tin pot. His shirt was a burlap coffee sack with holes cut out for his head and arms.

Each winter he would load up on apple seeds that he got for free from cider presses in Pennsylvania. Then he would strike out on foot along rivers and Indian trails to unclaimed land where he would plant the seeds in spring and make a brush fence around them to keep out the deer.

Chapman later returned to collect seedlings which were sold or bartered with newly arriving settlers, most of whom were farmers. Oftentimes they were required to plant an orchard as a stipulation of land ownership.

The apples from his trees were mostly puny, sour little things, according to Means, who wondered why he didn't use grafting techniques that were known at the time to produce a desirable apple variety. He may not have cared, Means surmised, because many of the apples were fed through a press and the juice fermented to make hard cider, brandy or vinegar.

During the course of his life, Chapman bought several lots in towns along his way, leading to the conclusion that he might have been a small-time land speculator. He also was a religious zealot who approached settlers with a cheery greeting and news that he said came direct from heaven.

Even by frontier standards John Chapman was an odd character, although he was welcomed wherever he went as a missionary of goodwill. The life stories of many pioneers have been lost or forgotten, which is really a shame, but their odd visitor, Johnny Appleseed, is remembered to this day.

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*Stewart Truelsen is a regular contributor to the Focus on Agriculture series and is the author of a book marking the American Farm Bureau Federation's 90th anniversary, Forward Farm Bureau.*