

Johnny Appleseed

Today is Johnny Appleseed Day, and it's a good time to reflect on the life of this extraordinary man. In real life, his name was John Chapman, born on September 26, 1774, near Leominster, Massachusetts. Little is known of his early life, but he apparently received a good education that helped him in his later years. By the time he was 25 years old, he had become a nurseryman and had planted apple trees in the western portions of New York and Pennsylvania.

When the rich and fertile lands lying south of the Great Lakes and west of the Ohio River were opened for settlement in the early 1800s, Chapman was among the very first to explore the new territory. This was the Northwest Territory from which the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Illinois were later formed. For nearly half a century, Johnny Appleseed roamed his territory. When settlers arrived, they found Chapman's young apple trees ready for sale. In the years that followed, he became known as Apple Tree Man or Johnny Appleseed.

His manner of operation was simple. He went into the wilderness with a bag of apple seeds on his back until he found a likely spot for planting. There he would clear the land by chopping out weeds and brush by hand. Then he planted his apple seeds in neat rows and built a brush fence around the area to keep out straying animals. His nurseries varied in size. Some were only an acre or so, while others covered many acres.

He did all of the work himself, living alone for weeks at a time with only the Indians and wild animals for companionship. He never carried a gun or weapon of any kind. He was a deeply religious man who lived by the Golden Rule and had no fear of man or beast. Indians accepted him as a friend, and he is reputed to have talked at times to the wild animals who watched him as he worked in his nurseries. Undoubtedly, they sensed his kind and gentle nature.

Once, it is reported, he was caught in a snowstorm and crept into a hollow fallen tree for shelter. He found it occupied by a hibernating bear and her cubs, but spent the night there nonetheless. There is no report, however, of how much space he kept between them and himself.

Chapman was a practical businessman as well as a sincere Christian. He never married, but he loved people. As the settlers moved into the wilderness, his lonely nights were fewer because he was a welcomed guest at every cabin. Many a night, after the meal, he would hold them all enthralled with his stories or read to them from the Bible or from some religious material he carried. He felt that he had been commissioned to preach, to heal diseases, to warn of danger -- in short, to help God take care of the settlers.

Johnny Appleseed was living proof that a person can improve the natural environment, touch the lives of people in helpful ways and bless them spiritually in the process. That sounds like a mission that the associates of Life Care, American Lifestyles and Life Care at Home know something about.

--Beecher Hunter