

Apples and Mountain Cowboys from the Payson Roundup Sept 1, 2004

Fall and the sometimes extended Indian summers of the Rim country have long been my favorite time of year. This is the time when the wood vine and maple leaves turned red in the high-up canyons under the Rim (before the Dude Fire) and the aspen leaves twinkle yellow in the sun on top of the Mountain (Mogollon Rim). It was the time of the fall cattle roundups — the camaraderie of cowboys — the hard work during the days and the after-supper pitch games in the evenings. Best of all, it was the time of ripe apples.

BACK TRACKIN'



by
Jinx
Pyle

The apple trees came to the Rim country with the Mormon settlers. David Gowan got apple trees from the early Mormon settlers at Gisela and planted them at the natural bridge and in some of the other Rim country canyons and valleys. Gowan used to say

that apple trees should always be planted on the cold side of the valleys to avoid early blooming so that the blossoms wouldn't freeze.

The Meadows family planted apple trees at their Diamond Valley Ranch in the late 1870s. In 1893 when Elwood Pyle traded his Starr Valley property to Joe Ezell for 160 acres on Bonita Creek, the ranch already had apple trees.

Elwood understood apple trees. Under the nurturing of Elwood and Sarah Pyle, the Bonita Creek Ranch soon became known as Bonita Gardens. Hundreds of apple and other fruit trees, as well as berry vines, were abundant and many of the apple trees produced several kinds of apples and some had even been grafted to include pears as well.

My earliest memories are of Bonita Gardens — the creek teeming with the best trout ever to shine in cold water — and the apples. I learned early the names of the different kinds of apples and what they were best used for. The Maiden Blush was a solid red and yellow good for cooking and making cider.



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Elwood and Sarah Pyle knew apples and the fine art of gardening. Their farm at Bonita Creek was so productive, it became known as Bonita Gardens.

The King, fully twice as big as any other variety of apple, was red and yellow with vertical stripes and good for anything that an apple could be used to make. There were Permians, Smyth Ciders, Jonathans, Crabapples, red and yellow Delicious and others too numerous to mention.

The big cider press at Bonita Creek was idle for 10-1/2 months each year, but come the first of October, it rendered the juice from thousands of apples.

This was true of the Myrtle Ranch, too, which also boasted of a wonderful orchard and hundreds of apple trees. The lower 160 acres at the Myrtle Ranch on Ellison Creek was called Apple Valley by the Colonel Jesse W. Ellison family because of the orchards there and wonderful flavor of the apples.

I was not alone in my anticipation of the apple harvest. It was a time when friends, neighbors and relatives visited the ranches. Apple butter, cider, jelly, crabapple catsup, apple leather, boxes of the best keeping apples, dried apples and

other related products were put up until they filled the storehouses. Visitors to the ranches hauled off truckloads of cider and boxes of apples and still, the apple crops never came close to being fully harvested. The fallen apples didn't go to waste though. The horses fed for months on apples after first rolling them with their noses a couple of times to get the bees out.

I don't remember tasting a store-bought apple before I went into the service. I was stationed in Virginia. It was the fall of the year and I was hungry for apples and deer jerky. I wrote home for jerky, but I had to get my apples from a store. One bit was enough. They were mealy, juiceless, the skin was tough as a piece of dry bull hide, and the taste was something like I imagined might be experienced by chewing on an old newspaper.

I should have learned my lesson, but I had seen some apple trees in the country and thought that I would take a ride out there when the apples were ripe. I did and they were better than the store-bought variety, but as different from Rim country apples as a one-eyed donkey is from a Driftwood-bred quarter horse. Many years later I lived in Oregon where I tasted apples fresh from the orchards of both Washington and Oregon. They were just as good as the apples in Virginia.

During the early 1980s when we still owned the Myrtle Ranch we bought a home on Quail Run, just east of Starr Valley about a quarter mile north of Diamond Point Shadows, and only about 15 miles from the Myrtle Ranch. There were apple trees on the property, so my dad and I brought down some graft from the apple trees on the Myrtle Ranch and grafted them onto the trees at the Quail Run home. We raised a wonderful garden there and expected that the apples would be as good as those raised on the ranch. Three years later, those grafts yielded fruit. The King and Delicious apples looked the same as those we raised at the Myrtle Ranch and the taste was good, but not

Memories of Rim country apples

even close to as good as that of those apples raised high up under the Mogollon Rim above Payson, even though they were produced from the grafts of those same trees. A move of just 15 miles made a tremendous difference in the taste of those apples.

For whatever reasons, I believe that the climate and soil conditions at Bonita Creek, Webber Creek, the upper East Verde, the Myrtle Ranch and some other canyons and valleys high under the Mogollon are ideal for apples. There may be other places that produce apples as good, but I have my doubts.

I recall the fall cattle roundups at the Buck Pasture. We would take boxes of apples and fresh apple cider to the top of the Rim and down to the cabin off Buck Springs Ridge. That was our summer headquarters shared with my uncle, C.A. "Bud" Jones. My mom, Dorothy Pyle, was there to cook for us and she knew what to do with apples. Apple pan dowdy, apple pies and cobblers were a regular dessert. The cowboys carried jumper pockets full of apples when we rode and most of us began to eat them in the mornings before we were out of sight of the barn.

Now, let me tell you about fresh apple cider and its byproducts. Most people know that if you let cider do the natural thing, it will turn to vinegar after a couple of months. If an air lock is put on it, it can be made into wine. If the wine is distilled, you have apple brandy. If the wine is frozen, a hot poker can be pushed into the ice where a pocket of sweet apple alcohol lies hidden. Drain this liquid from the ice and you have Apple Jack, a beverage much like apple brandy, except that it has never been cooked and has a better taste for that reason.

What we took to the Buck Pasture was fresh apple cider, but after a day or so, it would begin to bubble as it proceeded on its way to vinegar. During the first couple of weeks of this stage it is a wonderful drink.

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The sugar is breaking down to form carbon dioxide and a small amount of alcohol, so it isn't as sweet and it is somewhat carbonated. And is it good? Let me tell you!

It was two o'clock on a cool fall morning. I was sleeping on a cot in the main room of the Buck Pasture cabin when I heard my great uncle, Bud Jones (father of Stuart, Lee and Peggy) rattling around with a flashlight. I watched as he poured a glass of cider. He looked over at me and explained, "I just can't go to sleep as long as they's any of it left!"

Another great uncle, Oren Childers, was on his death bed. For the last few weeks of his life, I made sure that he had a jug of cider under his bed. The Payson Hospital or Clinic, as it was called then, was more tolerant of cowboys then than now, and I know the cider made his passing easier.

One of the benefits of a cowboy's life is the good beef, wild game, potatoes, gravy, beans and biscuits. And for those of us who cowboied in the Rim country, home-grown apples were the reward for raising cattle in country so rough that we used to joke about cows falling out of a pasture. So, as fall approaches and I look at

that old Rim, it brings back memories of those great apples and some pretty good cowboys too.

NOTE: If you want a numbered "Rodeo 101" Collector's Edition book, call Git A Rope! Publishing at (928) 474-0380 or call Sue Malinski at (928) 472-4677. It sells for \$100. "Rodeo 101" (soft cover) is now available at Sue Malinski's and Jackalope Books. It sells for \$25. This book includes the early history of Payson as well as the history of the Payson Rodeo, which is older than any rodeo in the world. It has 375 photos of pioneers, rodeo cowboys and cowgirls and rodeo queens.