



Native California Apple Varieties: Skinner's Seedling, Sierra Beauty, and Hauer Pippin

While California is highly esteemed world-wide for its excellent fruit crops, the apple has never enjoyed much recognition as a Golden State product. This despite the fact that California has long been a major producer of high quality apples and includes some of the world's best apple growing districts.

The wave of Euro-American settlers that invaded California in the mid-nineteenth century were quick to plant orchards of apple varieties that originated Back East during the colonial period or in the decades immediately following independence. Varieties derived from New York and New England (Esopus Spitzenberg, Jonathan, Tompkins King, Rhode Island Greening) were especially popular in Northern California and survive to this day in abandoned homestead sites. And for whatever reason, there was never much chance for native apple seedlings to establish themselves in the fruit marketplace.

Even as systematic fruit breeding became important in the twentieth century, the advent of California apple varieties never got off the ground. Luther Burbank(1849-1926) - without doubt the most acclaimed fruit hybridizer in horticultural history - focused very little attention on the apple: this despite the fact that his breeding grounds were located just outside of Sebastopol - California's great Gravenstein district. He did introduce the Winterstein apple, now virtually extinct due to its unexceptional quality.

Albert Etter (1872-1950) is, of course, another story and deserves his own chapter in the chronicles of California apple culture. He recognized the dearth of genuine native apple varieties and set out to change the situation with an ambitious hybridization program. By the end of his life he had managed to select and introduce a handful of his experimental seedlings. Did he succeed? More that a half-century after his death, we are still waiting to see which of his varieties will emerge as true "keepers"....

Meanwhile, there are a few old California natives that we might commend to the home orchardist and collector. They have proven themselves to be excellent in Northern California and should be worthy of trial in other parts of

the country.

Skinner's Seedling

In his early editions of *California Fruits and How to Grow Them*, Edward J. Wickson (1848-1923) appended his main list of apple varieties with descriptions of promising new seedlings originating in the state. Of the 14 varieties mentioned, only one seems to have made it into limited commerce. Though quite rare today, it is still prized by connoisseur apple collectors and propagated by a few specialty nurseries. We have come to regard it as one of the finest apples of its season (late August-early September). A distinctively beautiful apple, it combines large size with exceptional dessert and cooking quality.



Skinner's Seedling is a genuine California pioneer variety, originating from seed carried by settlers migrating from Wisconsin circa 1850. The seedling tree grew near the banks of Coyote Creek on a site east of San Jose owned by Judge H. C. Skinner. Judge Skinner was obviously impressed with the apple's many virtues and campaigned to gain it wider recognition and planting, particularly around the Santa Clara Valley, which in those days was known for its extensive orchards rather than "silicon". In 1887 the American Pomological Society officially recognized Skinner's Seedling as a distinct variety. A decade earlier the "New Fruits" committee of the A.P.S. had evaluated it and ranked it as "the Best very large apple we have seen". Besides its official name, Skinner's Seedling has also been called Skinner's Pippin and Santa Clara King.

Perhaps because of this last synonym, Skinner's Seedling has sometimes been described as a seedling derived from Tompkins King. We regard this alleged pedigree as highly improbable owing to that older variety's well-documented triploid infertility. The two apples are both large, regal varieties -

but bare little resemblance to each other. If anything, Skinner's Seedling has superior eating quality, with a more complex flavor informed by more robust acidity and richer aromatics.

Back when we first started collecting apple varieties, Skinner's Seedling was no longer available from nursery sources; furthermore, there were some suspicions regarding the trueness-to-name of selections circulating within the amateur fruit network. We were very fortunate to locate an authentic old homestead specimen growing in the Child's family orchard at Redcrest, California. Its identity was confirmed by an old zinc label still legible after three-quarters of a century of exposure to the elements.



Ironically, we have subsequently come across other Skinner's Seedling trees during our work to sort out nomenclatural problems with Albert Etter's patented apple varieties. Several times, we have been asked to confirm the identity of trees purchased as Alaska and Etter's Gold from California Nursery Company in the late 1940's to early 1950's. In each case, the fruit turned out to earlier ripening, red-blush variety of surprising good quality that we were able to identify as Skinner's Seedling.

The source of this mix-up became obvious when Bruce Roeding, who took over CNC from his father, furnished us with a map key of their original sourcewood orchard. The patented Etter/CNC varieties were interplanted in a block of established Skinner's Seedling trees. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that in order to save time and space the Etter scionwood was framework-grafted on mature Skinner's Seedling trees.

At any rate, as CNC went through hard times and fell into disrepair, varieties like Alaska and Etter's Gold were easily mixed up with Skinner's Seedling. While this mistake might have generated both disappointment and pomological confusion, at least the customers ended up with an excellent and very rare apple variety. The privilege of growing and eating Skinner's Seedling apples will always be fortuitous.

Sierra Beauty

Another indigenous California variety that deserves to be more widely known and grown is the Sierra Beauty, an outstanding apple that comes with an interesting story. According to old catalog accounts, it was found as a chance seedling, growing in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, 30 miles east of Oroville in Butte County; the discovery occurred around 1870. Twenty years later, it debuted as Sierra Beauty at Rancho Chico Nursery, an enterprise operated by General John Bidwell (1819-1900), an orchardist, nurseryman, and founder of the town of Chico.



Sierra Beauty does earn its name; the apples are large and colorful with a creamy yellow background typically suffused by a beautiful crimson-red blush. The white flesh has excellent texture, at once crisp, tender, and juicy. The flavor is brisk with sugar and acid as well as strongly aromatic in a pineapple mode. It is a versatile apple, serving well for fresh dessert, cooked pies and sauces, and spritely sweet cider. It ripens here in October and stores easily for a few more months.

Founded in 1851, Rancho Chico Nursery was the second oldest nursery in California. It was also one of the largest, its 1889-1890 advertisement claimed an inventory of 600,000 fruit trees and 200,000 grapevines. It did not, however, survive as an independent business into the new century. Instead, Rancho Chico Nursery was acquired by Oregon Nursery Company (ORENCO) which was well on its way to becoming "the largest nursery in the West". Sierra Beauty apple became another variety acquisition on ORENCO's formidable list of fruit tree offerings, where it continued to be marketed through the next two decades. After World War I, ORENCO suffered the consequences of its over-extended structure in a changing economy. And as ORENCO faded into oblivion, so did a number of its worthy but less well-known fruit varieties - including Sierra Beauty.

Sierra Beauty apple seemed both gone and forgotten until a renaissance in amateur fruit interest began to unfold circa 1970. Larry McGraw of Portland Oregon, amateur pomologist and historian, became intensely interested in

the fate of ORENCO' "lost varieties; he was especially curious about Sierra Beauty. Mr. McGraw went on to found the Home Orchard Society and inspired several protégés to help him in this quest. Fruit exploring expeditions were undertaken to the area around Chico, but no one seemed to find any traces of this virtually extinct variety.



All this while, the Sierra Beauty apple had remained alive and well in the stewardship of the Gowan family of Philo California. The variety had been a favorite in the family's small commercial orchard for a couple of generations, marketed at their roadside fruit stand. By 1980, Jim Gowan had focused on increasing his Sierra Beauty production for marketing to retailers in Northern California. So - at about the same time that Wayne and Jeannie Huffstutter of H.O.S. finally "re-discovered" Sierra Beauty at the Gowan's self-service stand along a two lane highway near Philo - we became acquainted with it at our local supermarket

After a phone call to Mr. Gowan, we were able to obtain scionwood and have been propagating it ever since. It does very well here in Ettersburg, obviously enjoying our hot days and cool evenings. Compared to fruit grown in the somewhat cooler Anderson Valley, our Sierra Beauty apples show significantly more blush and a higher sugar content. It is becoming an increasing popular variety at farmer's markets and we recommend it with enthusiasm to home orchardists and small commercial growers.

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Our thanks to the Gowans of Philo for making Sierra Beauty their family heirloom and keeping it alive and in commerce. Also, let us acknowledge the dedicated effort of our friends in the Home Orchard Society in uncovering the history of this - and many other- West Coast varieties. Especially, we remember Larry McGraw, who inspired and helped so many fruit enthusiasts with his relentless perseverance, and who insisted that we someday tell the

story of Sierra Beauty...

Hauer Pippin

This is another relatively obscure family heirloom with some regional exposure that now seems destined for a wider audience. It originated as a seedling, selected by Peter Hauer (1859-1951), an apple grower based in Pleasant Valley nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains. He named Hauer Pippin apparently to indicate a genetic lineage to Cox Orange Pippin; while this connection is theoretically possible, we do not detect enough resemblance between the two varieties to warrant any claim of parentage. Nevertheless, the Hauer Pippin is an exceptional variety with many good qualities.

Its value remains appreciated in Santa Cruz County where it continues to be grown as a specialty orchard crop. It ripens very late (November) and keeps well, making it a good variety for the holiday market. A small to medium apple, it is remarkable for its rich, deep red skin speckled with distinctive russet dots. Because of its colorful appearance and late season, it has been dubbed "the Christmas apple" by some retailers.



The Hauer Pippin has been a popular variety with California organic orchardists because of its resistance to disease and insect pests. It seems to be bothered less by codlin moth damage than most other apples. Its main drawback is the long, warm growing season required to ripen the fruit on the tree. Fortunately, quality improves during the first month or two in storage while the texture remains crisp.