

JOHNNY APPLESEED: Planting More Than Just Seeds

A background essay on Hank Fincken's portrayal of Johnny Appleseed for those who want to go a bit deeper. A second place to read about Johnny's amazing story, including his Pittsburgh connections, is Michael Pollan's fine book, "The Botany of Desire," which has an elegant section on apples in general and Johnny in particular.

Ohio has as much claim to Johnny Appleseed as any state in the union. He arrived shortly after the start of the nineteenth century and called it home even after he had moved most of his work to Indiana. Without a doubt, his most fruitful years (pun intended) were planting seeds and selling apple seedlings throughout the Ohio Valley.

Stories of his life here have been passed down from father to son and mother to daughter for generations. These family histories provide clues of what the man must have been like but few can be documented and many are contradictory. Some are based on fact; others on wishful thinking, but all are treasured heirlooms, the source of family, county, and state pride.

That is why it is almost impossible to capture the "real" John Chapman and why my interpretation can never satisfy everyone. Since the stories told were heard in youth, the image created in the mind seems almost sacred. How dare I portray him differently from what one has known since childhood? Never mind that some of these stories present Johnny more divine than human and others reduce him to a buffoon. Each of us clings to something unique and special about the man or the man we wish he was. He is the devoted cleric, the jolly storyteller, the simpleminded peddler, the eccentric handyman, and the homeless wanderer. He is all this and more. Or maybe none of the above.

In the fall of 1982, teachers from Washington Carver Elementary School in Muncie Indiana asked me to use my theater skills to bring Johnny Appleseed back to life. They would make the costume if I would do the research and write the script.

It sounded simple enough. I anticipated three months of preparation and a week or two for revision. But I was wrong. Twenty years and over one thousand performances later, I am still wondering who this John Chapman character was.

The difficulties began almost from the start. In my research at Ball State University library, I found very little concrete information (primary sources) about John Chapman the man and too many unsubstantiated anecdotes about Johnny Appleseed the legend. The two were one, separate and inseparable at the same time.

John Chapman was a preacher, who sold apple seedlings to help support his ministry. Johnny Appleseed distributes bags of apple seeds everywhere, talks with rabbits, sleeps with bears, and wears a mush pot on his head. I first saw the dilemma of writing the script as John versus Johnny. Today I see it as: what do I owe the memory of John Chapman and what do I owe the audience, who prefers John's friendly incarnation, Johnny?

For example, people are curious to know where, when, and why John/Johnny planted his first seeds. Although no one knows for sure where and when he started (and people from western New York would argue this point), the earliest reliable sighting of

John at work, documented in the memoirs of Judge Lansing Wetmore (1853) is in western Pennsylvania in 1797. John's Swedenborgian faith would have him see a connection between planting apple seeds and planting spiritual seeds. It is in the wilderness, Swedenborgians believe that the physical and spiritual worlds blend one into the other. ("Correspondences" is their term for events running in both the spiritual and natural worlds at the same time.) That is an excellent reason for John Chapman to begin his work, but it is not good enough for those who love Johnny.

Acquaintances, county history books, modern biographers, and authors of children's books, give an assortment of reasons why Johnny headed west to plant his first seeds. These include the following: 1) he got kicked in the head by a horse and lost his common sense; 2) he got caught in a severe snowstorm that ultimately affected his judgment; 3) his fiancée's father disliked Johnny so much he moved west to prevent the wedding and Johnny spent the rest of his life in pursuit; and 4) grief caused his bride's painful death on the night of their marriage prevented him from ever settling down.

All of these stories imply that Johnny would never have done what he did if he had possessed all his faculties. These explanations reveal more about the people who tell them than they do about the person that they are trying to explain. John/Johnny's lifestyle was so unusual (and illogical for most profit-oriented Americans) that contemporaries needed to create appropriate motivation. I trusted none of these reasons, as charming as they might be, because they are common to many folk characters, not just Johnny, and there was no way to verify sources.

Of course, John's "real" reasons for setting out may have been much more humdrum than religious zeal or mental deficiency. John's mother died when he was two. His father remarried and moved to Longmeadow, Massachusetts. Maybe his ten half brothers and sisters created such a workload and chaotic home life that the wilds of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana seemed tame by comparison.

Some of John's background can be documented. We know he was born on 26 September 1774 in Leominster, Massachusetts, the second child of Nathaniel and Elizabeth (formerly Simon) Chapman. His birth was registered by The First Congregational Church and these records were rediscovered in 1935. We know Nathaniel served in The Revolutionary War (probably one of the "Minute Men," maybe was dishonorably discharged in 1780) and Elizabeth wrote him shortly before her own death in 1776.

There are other letters, deeds, and court documents that prove John Chapman worked throughout Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Indiana. There are other reports that make it probable that he traveled in New York, West Virginia (before it was West Virginia), Kentucky, and Illinois. Perhaps the most documented event in John Chapman's life concerns a thirty-mile trip he made in 1812 to save the lives of many settlers, who had taken refuge in a blockhouse in Mansfield, Ohio. (A replica stands there today.)

During The War of 1812, many Native Americans sided with the British. When several north central Ohioans were murdered, the survivors hurried to Mansfield, where it was decided someone would have to travel south to Mount Vernon to get help. John volunteered, and several settlers later remembered his warning as he rushed by.

But here is where eyewitness testimonials become questionable. The ornate quality of the quotation attributed to John during this emergency belies its authenticity.

John is reported to have said, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He hath anointed me to blow the trumpet in the wilderness and sound an alarm in the forest. For behold the tribes of the heathen are round about your doors. A devouring flame followeth after them.”

This eyewitness quotation is as close as I can get to a primary source, but its accuracy depends on the infallible ear of the frightened listener remembered years later and the articulate clarity of the excited speaker. To add to my doubt, accounts vary as to whether John rode a horse the thirty miles to Mount Vernon or ran all the way barefoot.

The soldiers who returned to Mansfield eliminated the Indian danger, but they also murdered several local Indians from Greentown, an Indian village that had been friendly with the Mansfield community for seventeen years. This kind of situation is crucial to my understanding of John/Johnny. He has saved the town, but his efforts have caused the death of innocent people. (All sources agree that John and the Native Americans shared a mutual respect.) So what was his response? Was he torn with guilt for what had happened to his Indian brothers or content that his hard ride/run had saved the lives of his neighbors. What does John say and/or what do his neighbors say he said. Unfortunately, not a word is recorded. The most documented part of his life reveals nothing of his innermost thoughts, motives, or emotions.

This example explains why it is nearly impossible to capture the true character of John Chapman. If I want to bring his spirit back to life, I’ve got to know something about his deeper and conflicting thoughts. I’ve got to know something about what shaped his soul and see how he interpreted these no-win experiences. Was this the experience that caused him to become a member of the Church of New Jerusalem and a follower of Emanuel Swedenborg? (I could argue yes, but look at the flimsy evidence: Swedenborgians have respect for all life and earlier in his career the famous vegetarian is said to have stored his seeds in leather bags, and the first document that mentions John’s religious work is from 1817.) Did he ever live in an Indian community, or was his respect for the native people only from casual encounters? Was his language as florid as the above quotation suggests, or did he speak in the vernacular of the frontier?

As stated in Robert C. Harris’s *Johnny Appleseed Source Book* (1956), early Swedenborgians admired John as both a preacher and a horticulturist, and the first record of the nickname, John Appleseed, is in a letter from 1822. (Note that the more formal “John” is used instead of the more intimate “Johnny.” In southeastern Ohio it is said he was first called: Appleseed John.) Then in 1846, Henry Howe published *Historical Collections of Ohio* with a story that includes John and his saucepan hat. All these stories sound more like friendly neighborhood gossip than documented fact. True or not, they were told and retold by local folks for local folks. The tales of John and Johnny had yet to find a national audience.

Then, in November 1871, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, published an article by W. D. Haley called: “Johnny Appleseed: A Pioneer Hero.” This article is laced with anecdotes, moral insights, hearsay history, and obvious errors (e.g. John’s real name is Jonathan), but it opened a floodgate of John/Johnny stories. Suddenly, every Midwest town had a memory to share or a correction to make. Johnny Appleseed, the legend, was born.

Of course, there had been exaggerated stories before, but this article gave them an air of legitimacy. Since memory is very precarious source of history and many of these post-1871 stories have, as their basis, an event or experience at least twenty-five years

old, it is impossible to know which are accurate reminiscences, well-meaning embellishments, or simple fun-motivated fabrications.

Remember, too, many of these storytellers did not witness the events themselves. Often they were repeating what a family member or acquaintance had told them, changing details each time in the telling. Too often other eccentrics were confused with the original. How else do you explain such a range of attitudes and descriptions about the same man?

For example, one source claimed Johnny never touched liquor because of his religious convictions. A second claimed he enjoyed “a dram of spirits” in the winter to warm his insides. Then a third boldly writes: “As everyone knows, Johnny Appleseed was a lush.” There are accounts of the old man traveling through Missouri, Iowa, Oregon, and California, though his age alone makes these stories unlikely. Twice people reared in Nebraska have told me they learned in school that Johnny died in their state in 1855, ten years after the Indiana Johnny supposedly died in Fort Wayne; and during my own travels, a teacher shared with me a newspaper clipping about another actor performing as Johnny, who claimed Johnny died in Ohio in 1836.

The Haley article claimed Johnny came to Indiana in 1838, but John Dawson from Fort Wayne wrote in response that John arrived before 1830. I cannot be certain of the exact date anymore than I can tell you the state of his health when he arrived. If details are what make a character flesh and blood, then my John Chapman must always remain a shadow.

All sources state his clothing was simple, but beyond that, there is little agreement. Haley claims he wore a coffee sack coat (burlap was a new material in the early 1840s), but S. C. Coffinbury from Ohio flatly denies it. Haley tells anecdotes about Johnny being barefoot even in winter; a William McDaniel tells of Johnny wearing one shoe in order to punish the other naughty foot; and others talk about John wearing one shoe and one boot. Similarly, “his beard was grayish and clipped with shears”; it was “bushy black”; and “he never wore a full beard, but shaved all clean except a thin roach at the bottom of his throat.” An 1850 drawing—made by a supposed acquaintance—shows John clean shaven, and the Haley drawings have both hair and beard long and gray.

And what about the famous saucepan hat? Howe mentions it; Haley repeats it; and Dawson confirms it. Yet, the best biographer, Robert Price in *Johnny Appleseed: Man and Myth*, vehemently denies it. In other words, I have references to quote if I prefer to wear the pot or ignore it completely. How is that for having your apple cobbler and eating it too?

My own research uncovered four death dates (1846, 1846, 1847, 1850), and since I began performing, I have learned of two others--mentioned before (1836, 1855). Price makes a good case that John died in Fort Wayne in 1845, but the exact March date is questionable, and I could argue that the details in the newspaper article that back Price actually describe someone else (John is said to be from Cleveland and over eighty years old.).

Concerned Fort Wayne citizens have argued for years where John is buried. The son of his supposed gravedigger said he only knew the area, not the exact site of John’s grave (and certainly not on the mound where it stands today). Students in Cincinnati have sworn to me that John’s final resting place is just outside their city. Although I can

no longer find the source (and therefore am guilty of the same hearsay history that I use to discredit others), I distinctly remember reading of two Ohio towns which at the turn of the twentieth century claimed that John was buried there.

John's business was to guess where future immigrants would settle, plant seeds in the area, and then sell the seedling to the new arrivals two or three years later. The Midwest pioneers were able to buy land for next to nothing, but to keep it (or get "permanency" as they said back then), they had to develop the land and pay taxes within five years. The average apple tree produces fruit in four to five years and begins to have a decent harvest in seven. Anyone who had fifty or more apple trees could claim the land had been developed. The apple itself was a nourishing staple that—if kept in a cool place—would not spoil, and in the form of apple brandy (applejack) or apple chips (dried apple slices), it could be sold for cash. John's seedlings gave the new arrivals a two to three year head start and made permanent settlement more likely.

John Chapman was a nonviolent vegetarian. That is the truth behind the exaggerations that have Johnny talking to all the animals. Haley writes, for example, that John often put out his fire and ate his dinners cold so that the flames would not hurt the littlest mosquito. If I cut away some of this storyteller exaggeration, the man seems religious and earthy, nonviolent in a violent time, and respectful of all people and the land. Both Price and Harris provide references that show John liked children and told funny stories just before he preached. (Could that be the "fact" behind the sauce pan hat?) I can show you his signature, on a Jay County, Indiana land deed, for example, but I can't tell you if he was pleased with the arrangements, whether or not he joked with local officials as he signed, nor how this particular endeavor turned out. I can only say: he was an eccentric, laughed at and with in almost equal measure.

When I wrote the script, I felt I had a lot of apple peelings but not much pulp or core. Since it was impossible to know the "real" John Chapman, I decided I would recreate my John/Johnny by letting him tell tall tales based on his life. For example, I knew, thanks to Judge Wetmore, that John began his business ill-prepared and suffered a hard first winter. I did not know exactly what happened, but I could stretch these simple facts into stories both John and Johnny would enjoy telling. In this way, I believed I would come closer to the heart and spirit of the man than if I trusted hearsay Haley or contradictory secondary sources. Ideally, my art and history would become one.

One tough question remained: how should I treat John's religious faith? John saw himself as a preacher, but if I was to work in schools and public buildings, I would have to be careful that my play was not interpreted as a sermon.

Emanuel Swedenborg was a mystic and a scientist, who claimed to have visited both heaven and hell. He wrote several books, which his disciples respect almost as much as the Bible. John carried and distributed these books, often announcing he had "Good News right fresh from heaven." Several witnesses quote this beginning, but no one recorded the sermon that followed. Hoping not to compromise his Swedenborgian faith nor my audience's, I elected to have John speak of his religion in generic terms: loving God, respecting the earth, and working for all mankind's best. To add some dramatic tension (and true to his outdoor spirit), I have John both thrilled to see people and anxious to get away.

I decided to present John at seventy, with the same enthusiasm he had at thirty. This way he can talk about his whole life, especially his times in Ohio and Indiana. I

dress him in simple clothing of the times: pants from an 1840s pattern, a period shirt, burlap vest, and an ugly woolen hat. I decided against the pot because: 1) it would be impossible to keep on during my energetic performance, 2) most Chapman descendants deny it, 3) the 1850 drawing of John does not have it, 4) most of the many stories never mention it (If you wore a pot on your head, it would be the first thing people said about you.), 5) most pots of the day were cast iron, and 6) a pot on the head would be uncomfortable, unclean and no protection in bad weather. To survive in the wilderness, John/Johnny would have had to be practical. In a nutshell, a pot on the head would be a pain in the neck.

For years, I was quite content with my version of Johnny Appleseed. I performed at museums, colleges, festivals, and schools throughout the Midwest and even Peru, South America. Many praised the play as one of the best programs ever at their institutions. Was my version the definitive word? Of course not. The scarcity of facts allows for multiple interpretations. Johnny Appleseed is evolving even as I write.

But is there a limit?

The question occurred to me in the early 1990s when I received an evaluation from a good school that said, "The teachers were hoping for a serious, more realistic Johnny Appleseed." Now no objective criteria exists to judge quality humor. Comedy is redefined by each generation, and serious issues may not seem so serious when wrapped in laughter. But this criticism shocked me. Was I sacrificing certain historical truths for a good laugh? Was I doing John a disservice to make him funny? I was suddenly forced to reassess my interpretation of John/Johnny and the audience's right to see the John/Johnny of their choosing.

After a series of discussions with teachers, I concluded that the one school (and maybe others too) wanted me to put more emphasis on John's relationship with the environment. Ecology was a hot issue in the early 90s. "Serious and realistic" meant they wanted me to reinforce something that was being said in the classroom. "Save the forest. Love the animals."

My assessment was confirmed a short time later when an Illinois agent called me with a plan. A major donor was interested in sponsoring one hundred programs if I presented John as: The World's First Ecologist. When I tried to explain that Johnny would not have understood the word as we know it and that "ecology" was not a theme of my play, the agent responded, "You're talented. Just rewrite the script."

I am not against the ecological message. I am against twisting history to make Johnny say it. John sold apple seedling to people moving west so they might stay permanently. He was assisting those who wanted to clear the land of native plants and trees. Yes, John respected nature, but to turn him into an environmentalist is to distort the facts. If I had agreed to rewrite the script according to the wishes of the "serious and realistic" school and the agent, the past would be lost forever.

Around the same time, a major festival booked ten shows in local schools but was scandalized that I appeared on stage with dirty feet (make up). These well-meaning people knew John went barefoot, but they believed that hygiene was a more important issue than historical accuracy. They feared that my dirty feet might be interpreted as their endorsement for dirty bodies. They were petrified that controversy would cloud the noble purposes of their annual event.

In this atmosphere, history is no longer presented as the study of a complex past, but rather as a sports highlight film: short, simple, exciting, and impossible not to understand. Schools prefer role models, not historical figures, who inspire and reassure through their every deed and thought. Ambiguity and controversy are avoided so as not to confuse the most vulnerable. Accuracy seems important only if it doesn't interfere with contemporary goals.

Sometimes we forget that history is not a page of statistics. It evolves (or if you wish: has a life of its own) according to our mental and spiritual state of the time. The deeds themselves may not change but our vantage point most certainly does. That is why no biography (or play) can ever be the definitive one (except for the moment) and why each biography tells as much about the biographer and his/her times as it does about the book's subject.

The danger, however, comes when facts gets changed (or ignored) to fit a new modern need. It isn't good enough that John respected nature. Now he has to be an ecologist. We can admire John's rejection of material wealth only if we see he keeps himself impeccably clean. Maybe John should not be presented as an eccentric because the children might laugh for all the wrong reasons. Better that he be seen as a mystic who—so as to offend no one—rarely mentions his religious beliefs.

If we can only appreciate historical figures when they reflect our current moods and values, then all our forefathers and mothers must be condemned. They aren't us, and that is a sin no contemporary, secular god can forgive. I say: what value can history ever have if The Big Picture is always seen as the trendy issue?

John/Johnny deserves our respect not for any one thing he did or did not do, but because of his basic humanity to all people for a lifetime. In his time, there were many excellent reasons to choose violence over peace and profit over selflessness. John gives us all hope we can do better.

John's basic humanity (grizzly on the outside, a teddy bear on the inside), then, will be the constant in my presentation, however much Johnny continues to evolve. That is what I owe John Chapman and also what I owe the audience, whether it agrees with me or not. John's task then will mirror my own. We will try to provide insights with humor, without having to put the world into apple pie order.