
The Forgotten Orchards of Derby Reach Park

- by Sharon Meneely (Fall 2003 Newsletter)

One of those magical moments that have become indelibly imprinted on my mind forever occurred in Derby Reach Park. Walking with my neighbour, Marion Tucker, on a sunlit morning in early summer, hours before the press of crowds arrived, we crested the highest hill behind the Markow barn. There, beneath of the sprawling limbs of the largest apple tree, lay a glossy wet newborn foal with its mother nearby. The birth was so recent that the intact placenta lay nearby, and ours were the first human eyes to witness that wondrous miracle. We stood transfixed for ages, unable to take our eyes away as the mother nudged her offspring to a vertical position. And I couldn't help but think that she had found the most beautiful spot in the world to give birth to her foal. She, no doubt, had thought of the safety that the high vantage point afforded; with the fence behind her and a vista that would reveal all comers, she could defend her little one from any assault.



To this day, I cannot pass that particular spot on the trail without a smile passing my lips. Years have come and gone, and the mother has become older and the baby grown to adulthood, yet the trees remain pretty much the same—a little older, perhaps, and little more crowded by the vines of blackberries. Those trees have grown on the crest of that hill alongside of the Fraser River for more than a century.

Curious to know exactly how old they were and what variety they were, I talked to Danny Markow. Danny's father, William Markow had bought the property in 1933, when Danny was only ten. At that time, the hilly bank was twice as high as it is now; the property that was 25 acres is now only 18. The relentless surge of the river around the S-bend has taken its toll over the years.

According to Danny, the orchard was planted in the early 1890s by a black man named Roger, whose last name he did not know. Roger had a little house next to the river and that house burned down to the ground before 1895. For a while after the house burned, Roger lived in a root cellar, under the roots of a large tree. And while Roger is long gone, remnants of his orchard remain.

Most of the trees were Northern Spy; some were crosses of King and Northern Spy. There were winter apples and russet apples; there were also winter pears, both round and long. Today, the remaining trees still produce fruit and provide shelter for the well-loved horses that claim the pasture. They attract birds and other animals as well. A year or two ago, in late summer, when there was bear

activity along the trail, trampled vines and bear traces could be found beneath the pear tree on the river-side of the trail. I have no doubt he found them delicious!

Further down the Fort-to-Fort Trail, north of the cairn, there are more apple trees that might have been planted by the men of the original Fort. These, according to Alf Trattle in a Langley Times article printed on January 6, 2002, include a Wolf River apple tree that is one of the oldest apple trees in the Fort. "It produced a great cooking apple,' Trattle remember[ed]. 'Once a year [his] mother would go down to the tree and pick a full basket of these apples for her cooking.'"

Today, all of these trees are overrun with invasive vines and badly in need of pruning. Perhaps the time has come to reclaim these forgotten orchards in Derby Reach Park and reclaim some of our lost history.