

The Apple Industry in Henderson County Then & Now

The apple has been called the loveliest of all fruits. It is also one of the most important agricultural crops grown in Henderson County. During a normal year it brings in an average income of \$22 million dollars or more.

Henderson County ranks seventh in production among all the counties in the United States. The county grows 65 percent of all the apples grown in the state. If the number of apples from a normal crop grown in the county were laid two abreast, they would reach from Hendersonville to Tokyo and return. Today there are approximately 200 apple growers in Henderson County.



The first apple grower in Henderson County was William Mills. He set fruit trees, (including apple), near his home in Fruitland. He was also the first white settler in Henderson County. Mr. Mills was a loyalist, a major in the British Army, and first came to the area after escaping from capture by the Revolutionary Army at the Battle of Kings Mountain. In 1782 Asa and Samuel Edney married daughters of William Mills. They were among some of the first settlers in the Edneyville Community of Henderson County - where apple production first started in a big way.

The Development of the apple industry was very slow for the first 150 years due to poor means of transportation. During the 1890's and early 1900's farmers began hauling apples and other produce to Greenville, Spartanburg, and other South Carolina Counties. After the first railway was built into Henderson County in the early part of the twentieth century, people began to ship apples and vegetables out of the county.

In 1936, the sale of apples amounted to approximately two hundred thousand dollars per year. Since the mid-1930's apple production in Henderson County has rapidly expanded. The varieties that began to expand at that time were Regular Red Delicious, Stayman, and the Regular Rome Beauty, with some Golden Delicious coming in later. Black Ben was also very popular at that time along with Banana Rose, Hoover, Wolf River, and Early June. Growers started planting Starking in the Hendersonville Area about 1945. Double Red Rome and Double Red Delicious were started about the same time. The acreage of Golden Delicious was also greatly expanded. These were the main varieties until about 1959 or 1960 when some of the later sports varieties such as Starkcrimson, Red King, Topred, Vance Red Sport and others were planted in the county. In 1952 there were about 180,000 bearing apple trees in the county.

Modern equipment such as speed sprayers and automatic power pruners were first introduced in Henderson County in the 1950's. Andy Lyda of the Edneyville Community was the first grower to purchase a large speed sprayer. Mr. Lyda was well known for his operation of the Bee Hive Inn on St. Paul Road in the Edneyville Community. His inn was a favorite of many tourists that came in from Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and other states. His apple orchard surrounded his inn. The visitors could go and eat apples at their convenience.



Prior to 1950 most of the apples were picked and sold to truckers who bought directly from the orchard in bulk. The only method of packing was known as the "Ring pack" in bushel baskets. J.R. Thomas and H.E. Baxter were the first two packers in the county to pack apples in a commercial apple packing house. They both started about 1946 or 1947. During the early 1950's, they along with other packers, started to use the tray pack method that uses the same size and number of apples in trays and boxes.

At present many growers have built their own packing houses and are packing their own, plus some of their neighbors' apples. Cecil Henderson was the first grower to build a controlled atmospheric storage building in the county. This was built in 1983, with a storage capacity of 90,000 bushels.

In 1958 Gerber Products Company came to Henderson County to select a site for processing apples, peaches and many vegetable crops. This company finally located at Skyland in Buncombe County where they could get adequate water for processing. Gerber practically revolutionized the harvesting of apples in the county. The company introduced the idea of harvesting apples in bins and using forklifts to handle the boxes in loading them on trucks. The standard 20-bushel bin or box introduced by Gerber is now being used by all the growers in the county. Gerber also played a great part in causing the building of the Mountain Horticultural Crops Research Station. The company convinced the Agricultural Experiment Station at North Carolina State University in Raleigh of the importance of building the station - not only for apple research but also research on all kinds of vegetable crops. Sadly, the Gerber plant located in Skyland, North Carolina, closed in 1998.



In 1959 the apple growers of the county saw the need for more apple packing facilities as well as cold storage. They got together and organized the first apple packing cooperative in the county that was owned by farmers. This organization was known as the Western North Carolina Apple Growers Cooperative. During the mid 1980's, the cooperative had about 50 members and could pack in excess of 100,000 bushels and store more than 150,000 bushels of apples per year. Today, the co-op is used mainly for cold storage of apples.

Two other large apple processing and juice plants have been built in the county. J.N. Major, of Old Virginia, built a juice processing plant at Mountain Home in 1965. The plant was later purchased by Seneca and expanded in 1978. It is the Seneca headquarters for the southeastern states and is one of the largest producers of apple juice in the nation. In one year the plant can expect to press 525,000 bushels of apples, or 2 million gallons of juice.

The Blue Ridge Apple Growers is an organization made up of Henderson County area growers. It was formed in 1936 in cooperation with the Agricultural Extension Service. The object of this organization was to advertise and promote apples. Each year signs were erected on each highway leading into the county - stating that Henderson County apples were the "Best Flavored Apples" in the USA, and that an apple orchard map showing locations of apple orchards in the county could be found at any local service station. These maps were also mailed to apple buyers and truckers in Eastern America. This promotion was continued until 1970. Today the organization still concentrates on advertisement and promotion of apples while educating the growers and the public about the apple industry. In 1976 the apples growers organized the Carolina Apple Processing Cooperative known as "CAP". This organization was affiliated with Red Cheek of Pennsylvania and remained a good market for juice apples until 1984 when it was sold by the growers to H.P. Bomers, Ltd. of Hereford, England. It is currently operating under the name "All Juice".

National Fruit Products Company of Winchester, Virginia, with a plant in Lincolnton, North Carolina, Knouse Foods in Peach Glen, Pennsylvania, and Adbury Beverages, (formerly Duffy-Motts), in Aspers, Pennsylvania are three other companies where Henderson County apples are shipped for processing. There are many other apple processing companies that buy apples in the area.

The North Carolina Apple Growers Association was organized in 1954 by the Head of the Horticulture Department at North Carolina State University, Professor M.E. Gardner, in cooperation with leading apple growers in the state. Since that time this organization has been the primary apple promoter. The organization was instrumental in voting in a program to assess a fee on apples sold for advertising. Presently the fee is three cents per packed bushel and three cents per hundred weight for juice and processing apples. The money raised is used to promote North Carolina apples and apple research. This association also sponsors the Apple Ambassador scholarship program.



The Apple Ambassador is a rising senior in one of the Henderson county high schools. Two young people are chosen from each school. A committee then selects the Apple Ambassador. The representative must be knowledgeable about the apple industry and exhibit good leadership skills and good public speaking skills. The winner receives a scholarship sponsored by the North Carolina Apple Growers Association and a gold "Apple" necklace. Some of the duties the ambassador performs include meeting with the Governor and the Commissioner of Agriculture, speaking at the Southeastern Apple Growers meeting, and other official functions. She also participates in the Apple Festival activities.



The North Carolina Apple Blossom Festival was organized in 1947 by the Hendersonville Chamber of Commerce, Blue Ridge Apple Growers Association, and the County Agricultural Extension Service. The organization was later changed to the North Carolina Apple Festival. The Festival, held each year during the latter part of August, is climaxed with the King Apple Parade on Labor Day. The object of this organization is to promote North Carolina apples and the tourism industry in Henderson County.

Cultural methods have changed drastically since 1936, as well as chemicals used for controlling diseases and insects. In 1936 there were only four chemicals used for controlling diseases and insects, namely; liquid lime-sulfur, Bordeaux mixture, arsenate of lead, and nicotine sulfate. None of these are used at present. These have been replaced through the years by safer chemicals. Due to EPA regulations and reviews many chemicals are being lost for use on apples and other crops. There are also herbicides used for controlling weeds, brambles and grasses.

Likewise, cultural practices are changing from the "Good Old Days". In the 1930's apple trees were spaced 30 to 35 feet in the row, with rows 30 to 35 feet apart. At present the most popular spacing is 10 to 15 feet apart in the row, with row widths of 16 to 20 feet. The numbers of trees per acre has changed from 40 to 50 trees to 400 to 500 trees. The newer plantings are mostly of medium density plantings and of dwarfing rootstocks.

The names Dalton, Edney, Enloe, Freeman, Gilbert, Henderson, Hill, Jackson, Justice, Justus, Lamb, Lancaster, Laughter, Liese, Lyda, Merrill, Moore, Moss, Nix, Staton, and Stepp are very important in apple production in the county.

There are many organizations in the county that have worked with the apple growers to develop the industry. Some of these include: Agricultural Extension Service, (North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service); Farmers Home Administration, (Farm Service Agency); Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, Vocational Agriculture Department, Hendersonville Chamber of Commerce, Production Credit Association, (Mountain Farm Credit ACA); and many of the local banks and business leaders.

