

Apple detectives comb Northwest for ‘lost’ varieties

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

PULLMAN, Wash. — The apple tree stands alone near the top of a steep hill, wind whipping through its branches as a perfect sunset paints its leaves a vibrant gold.

It has been there for more than a century, and there is no hint that the tree or its apples are anything out of the ordinary. But this scraggly specimen produces the Arkansas Beauty, a so-called heritage fruit long believed to be extinct until amateur botanists in the Pacific Northwest tracked it down three years ago.

It’s one of 13 long-lost apple varieties rediscovered by a pair of retirees in the remote canyons, wind-swept fields and hidden ravines of what was once the Oregon

Territory.

E.J. Brandt and David Benscoter, who together form the nonprofit Lost Apple Project, log countless hours and hundreds of miles in trucks, on all-terrain vehicles and on foot to find orchards planted by settlers as they pushed west more than a century ago.

The two are racing against time to preserve a slice of homesteader history: The apple trees are old, and many are dying. Others are being ripped out for more wheat fields or housing developments for a growing population.

“To me, this area is a goldmine,” said Brandt, who has found two lost varieties in the Idaho panhandle. “I don’t want it lost in time. I want to give back to the people so that they can enjoy what our forefathers did.”

Brandt and Benscoter



Ted S. Warren/AP Photo
Amateur botanist David Benscoter, of The Lost Apple Project, picks an apple that may be of the Clarke variety in an orchard near Pullman.

scour old county fair records, newspaper clippings and nursery sales ledgers to figure out which varieties existed in the area. Then they hunt them down, matching written records with old property maps, land deeds and

sometimes the memories of the pioneers’ great-grandchildren. They also get leads from people who live near old orchards.

The task is huge. North America once had 17,000 named varieties of domesti-

cated apples, but only about 4,000 remain. The Lost Apple Project believes settlers planted a few hundred varieties in their corner of the Pacific Northwest alone.

The Homestead Act of 1862 gave 160 acres to families who would improve the land and pay a small fee, and these newcomers planted orchards with enough variety to get them through the long winter, with apples that ripened from early spring until the first frosts. Then, as now, trees planted for eating apples were not raised from seeds; cuttings taken from existing trees were grafted onto a generic root stock and raised to maturity. These cloned trees remove the genetic variation that often makes “wild” apples inedible — so-called “spitters.”

Benscoter, who retired in 2006 after a career as an FBI

agent and an IRS criminal investigator, pursues leads on lost apples with the same zeal he applied to his criminal cases.

In one instance, he found county fair records that listed winners for every apple variety growing in Whitman County, Washington, from 1900 to 1910 — an invaluable treasure map. In another, he located a descendant of a homesteader with a gigantic orchard by finding a family history she posted online.

Once he discovers a forgotten orchard, Benscoter spends hours mapping it. He has pages of diagrams with a tiny circle denoting each tree, with GPS coordinates alongside each dot. A lengthy computer database lists apples including the Shackleford, the Flushing Spitzenburg and the Dickinson — all varieties rediscovered by the project.

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Photo courtesy of Krissy Barendse-Goodman

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