

Wholesome Heroes with Rick Sowah: Johnny Appleseed

Think about the apple. Right away, good things come to mind. The apple strikes us as wholesome, nourishing, beautiful, and delicious. We say, “as American as apple pie.” We say, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” We say, “motherhood, America, and apple pie.” We say these things because we are Americans, and that’s how Americans think about the apple.

But it hasn’t always been that way. In older traditions, the apple is a symbol of evil. The story of the Trojan War begins when an apple of discord is rolled into the midst of a wedding of the gods. The forbidden fruit from the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden is always portrayed as an apple. The evil, old witch gives Snow White a poisoned apple. In Latin, the word for apple is “malum” which is also the Latin word for evil, and the root of our words “malady” and “maladjusted.” The heroic archer William Tell is forced to endanger the life of his own son by shooting off his head an apple.

Who turned around the apple? Who changed it from a symbol of evil into a symbol of wholesomeness? A wholesome hero, that’s who! An American hero named John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed.

Here I am at the University of Urbana, home of the Johnny Appleseed Museum. This museum contains the largest known collection of Johnny Appleseed stuff. Let’s go inside and meet the fellow who runs this museum, Joe Besecker.

“Hi Joe.”

“Hi Rick.”

“We’re glad you’re here at our Johnny Appleseed Museum.”

“Well, thanks. We’re mighty proud to be here. We’re here to see what you have to show us.”

“Well, we’re real proud of the things we have here. I’ll be glad to show them to you.”

“Well, tell me Joe, ‘What kind of stuff do you have here?’ I see these books, for example.”

“Yes, this is our little gift shop here at the Appleseed Museum, and we have all kinds of books on Johnny Appleseed.”

In a few minutes, Joe will show us around the museum. In the meantime, let’s step back in time and take a look at the early life of Johnny Appleseed and his mission.

Johnny Appleseed was born in September, and that’s perfect because September’s the time of year when the apples are ripe. Johnny Appleseed was born September 26, 1774,

and his father was one of the original minutemen who went off to fight the British in the battles of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill. And Johnny Appleseed's father, Nathaniel Chapman, was with George Washington during the harsh winter at Valley Forge. But it was during that winter that George Washington sent home Nathaniel Chapman: sent him home in disgrace for doing something wrong. We don't know exactly what he was doing. Somehow, it was mismanagement of the army's food supplies. We don't know exactly what. But when Nathaniel Chapman came home in disgrace, he found that his wife, Johnny's mother, had died.

Nathaniel Chapman married again quickly and soon there were ten more little children in that family. A crowded little home it must have been for Johnny Appleseed growing up with eleven brothers and sisters. And think about the Fourth of July for young John Chapman. All the other boys' and girls' fathers would have been able to march in the parade, proud to celebrate America's independence. But not Johnny Appleseed's father. Johnny Appleseed's father had been sent home in disgrace, and he could not take his place amongst the veterans on the Fourth of July celebration. I like to think of Johnny, perhaps a little ashamed of his father, hiding off in the family orchard while all the kids were cheering as the parade marched by.

At the age of fourteen, young John Chapman left his home up in Massachusetts and he never returned. We don't know exactly where he went. Some say he went to sea. A lot of young men did. A lot of young men growing up in Massachusetts went off to sea in ships and maybe Johnny was one of those. Maybe that's where he picked up the idea that eating fruit was good for you. That was an idea that was new amongst the sailors. They were just then figuring out that eating fruits and a balanced diet could help keep sailors healthy. Maybe that's where he got the idea of going barefoot. Sailors in those days went barefoot, and Johnny, for the rest of his life, went barefoot. We don't know for sure, but he disappears from history for ten years, and then turns up in the Ohio frontier in his early twenties: a man with a sack of apple seeds and a mission.

There was nothing unusual about planting apple trees. Everybody had orchards: people in villages and farms, they would have an orchard. Johnny Appleseed's grandfather, when he died, left a will, and in the will it said that he was leaving ten good, fruit-bearing trees to the family. And Johnny Appleseed was not the first to plant apple trees in the wilderness. The Catholic missionaries and priests did that up on the shores of the Great Lakes.

But what was unusual about Johnny Appleseed – what was, in fact, unique to him – was his scheme of planting apple trees ahead of the frontier. Johnny Appleseed would go into the wilderness and find a place where he thought the pioneers would very likely make a settlement, a village in the years to come. Perhaps a place where two rivers came together. He would plant his apple trees there. Then, four or five years later when the settlers were coming into that part of the wilderness, they would look around and they would say, "This would be a good place for a village. The rivers come together here, and look! There are already apple trees growing here." And from that, they had known that Johnny Appleseed had done his work.

Thanks to hard working planters and growers like Johnny Appleseed, today we have over ten thousand different kinds of apples.

Long ago on a fine spring day
Johnny Appleseed came this way
Over hill and meadow land
He scattered his seeds with a lavish hand.

Winesap, Bell Flower, Northern spy,
Apples for baking, apples for pie
Apples are gathered in orchards today
For Johnny Appleseed came this way.

A tree has to work really hard to make apples. It takes over fifty leaves to produce a single fruit. But the work doesn't stop there. Today, many farmers still handpick the apples from their trees.

So what did the pioneers do with the apples they picked from Johnny Appleseed's trees? Let's find out together.

Johnny Appleseed's mission, as most everybody knows, was to plant apple trees in the wilderness so that the pioneers, when they arrived and made a settlement, would have already growing there a source of the most important fruit. To us today, the apple is a casual snack. We don't think of it as a life and death situation. But, in Johnny's day, apples were crucial to survival. The pioneers could not live without apples. Let me explain.

A pioneer coming into the wilderness would have along some cornmeal to eat, and some vegetable seeds and some bullets and gunpowder. With luck, they might be able to shoot a rabbit or squirrel or deer and have some meat. But there were no fruits. They planted their vegetable seeds. Soon, the vegetables grew, but vegetables, once harvested, quickly spoiled. They had no refrigerators. They had no way of canning their food to keep it fresh and wholesome. But what they did have was vinegar: vinegar from the apples harvested from Johnny Appleseed's trees. Vinegar, which was the difference between life and death, for the pioneers.

Why was vinegar so important? They needed it so that they could preserve vegetables. Now, I bought this bottle of vinegar at the grocery store. That's easy for us to do today. But there were no grocery stores in the wilderness back in Johnny Appleseed's day. And they'd have kept their vinegar in a jug much more like this one.

Now here's what they would do. They would harvest a vegetable, say, a cucumber. And then they would put the cucumber down into a barrel full of vinegar and salt, and the vegetable would be what we call pickled. In fact, a pickle is nothing but a cucumber that's been down in salted vinegar for a while. Now, picture the pioneers: January, the

snow is deep, no fresh vegetables out of the garden at that time of year. But they had something to eat, thanks to Johnny and the vinegar from his trees. They could reach into that barrel and pull out a pickle, and they would have something to eat besides cornmeal and deer meat in the long, hard winter.

No other fruit could be adapted to so many uses as the apple. Apples could be dried and hung from the rafters of the cabin. Apples could be wrapped in burlap and literally buried in the dirt floor of the cabin and dug up four or five months later and they'd still be edible. And you could make so many things out of apples! You could make apple butter, apple pie, apple cider – all things which we still enjoy today. But most important of all was the vinegar that came from Johnny's apple trees.

We learned that vinegar was very important in Johnny's day. To get vinegar from apples, the pioneers would use an apple press. At the Johnny Appleseed Museum is a very special apple press. This apple press belonged to Colonel John James, a good friend of Johnny Appleseed's. Johnny planted apple orchards for Colonel James, so this press was used to press the very apples from the very trees that Johnny Appleseed had planted. The press worked this way. First, you would pour apples into the top of the press. Then, you would turn the crank round and round until all the apples were crushed. Then, with a wheel toward the back, you would press the apples down in order to squeeze the cider juice out. The juice would then drop down into a bucket under the press, and you could use the juice to make apple cider vinegar.

There are so many great things you can make with apples. What are some of your favorite things?

"I like sour apples."

"I like apple juice."

"Apple jelly."

"I like apple pies."

"Apple crisp."

"I like applesauce."

"Pineapple!"

"No!"

"Caramel apples."

"I like apple cider."

“Apple dumplings.”
“I just like apples.”

Wow! All those things sound delicious, and I’ll bet Johnny Appleseed would have loved every one of them. But did you know that apples are really good for you? Eating an apple or applesauce or drinking 100% apple juice or apple cider can count as one of the five servings of fruits or vegetables that we’re supposed to eat every day. Plus, apples keep your heart healthy. Now you know why apples were so important back in Johnny Appleseed’s day, and why they’re still important for us today.

But what about Johnny Appleseed himself? What did he look like?

What did Johnny Appleseed look like? Of course, there are no photographs of him and no drawings. And yet, we have descriptions from pioneers’ letters and diaries. They say that he always wore a clean, white shirt, suspenders, and raggedy pants. They were very particular about that. They mentioned those raggedy clothes that he wore. They said he was clean and neat but dressed in rags. Why would he have dressed in rags? Well, perhaps sometimes he was carrying money and he didn’t want other people to think that he was rich cause some people might try to steal the money from him. Perhaps he disguised himself as a beggar as he went from orchard to orchard dealing with the pioneers in apples.

And also, as everybody knows, Johnny Appleseed went barefoot. So if I’m going to try to look like Johnny Appleseed, I need to be barefoot. So, I take off my moccasins and throw them over there. Johnny Appleseed went barefoot. They say he went barefoot year around, even in the wintertime. His feet were tough, walking over the rough ground, hundreds of miles through the wilderness, his feet became tough. Perhaps almost as tough as shoes would have been.

What else did Johnny Appleseed wear? Well, he carried a sack – a sack full of apple seeds. He never had a home of his own. They say he slept in a hollow log or in a tree, or sometimes he slept with pioneer families. They would take him in overnight and let him sleep on the floor next to the fire. And they say that Johnny Appleseed would recite from the Bible as a way of repaying the pioneers for the kindness that they had showed. So, you see, Johnny Appleseed probably carried with him also a Bible. I especially love to think of Johnny Appleseed reciting, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Johnny Appleseed was meek. He had no power over anybody, and certainly he inherited the power of the earth. The earth that grows things, wonderful things, things such as apples.

But I’m forgetting the most important thing of all: what Johnny Appleseed wore on his head. I suppose most people know the story of how Johnny Appleseed is supposed to have worn a pot on his head. So, I’ve brought along a pot. But a pot on your head? It’s not very comfortable, I’ll tell you that right now. And it doesn’t stay in place. I mean, it falls over. It’s not a practical piece of equipment to wear on your head. I don’t really think Johnny Appleseed went around all the time with a pot on his head. So where did

the idea come from? Why do people think of Johnny Appleseed as wearing a pot on his head?

No one knows for sure, but I have a couple of ideas. For one thing, in those old days, people used to use their hats to gather food. Perhaps he was using to gather nuts and berries because he lived out in the woods, living off of nuts and berries and other foods that he could pick up. And maybe from the idea that he puts nuts and berries into his hat, maybe from that came the idea that he wore a food container for a hat.

But there's another idea I like even better. One thing we know for sure about Johnny Appleseed: kids loved him! When he would come to a pioneer settlement, the kids would come running. "Johnny Appleseed's here! Johnny Appleseed's here!" He'd tell 'em stories, and he had stories to tell. Maybe one time, just to be funny, he put a pot on his head to make the kids laugh. And maybe those kids remembered that. Maybe those kids grew up and they said, "You know, I knew Johnny Appleseed. I remember one time he put a pot on his head." And those kids that heard that story, they grew up. And they said, "You know, my grandpa remembered Johnny Appleseed. He said that he sometimes put a pot on his head." And then those kids grew up and they told the story differently. They told how their great-great-grandpa knew Johnny Appleseed, and they he'd always used to wear a pot on his head. Now you see how a story can change? A story can change in the telling.

The hat that Johnny Appleseed probably really wore would have looked, I think, much more like this. A floppy, old hat with a broad brim to keep the sun off of his face when he was out doing his work in the orchards.

Here at the museum, most people love to pretend to be Johnny Appleseed. How about you? Did you ever put a pot on your head like Johnny Appleseed?

Wherever Johnny Appleseed went, people liked him. He was funny, friendly, and kind. And he told good stories. Let me tell you the sort of story Johnny Appleseed used to tell. Johnny was out walking in the woods one day when he heard a sad little sound. It was the sound of a little baby kitten of a wildcat meowing. He picked her up, tried to find her mother, but could never find the mother. Never did know what happened to that baby kitten's mother. He took the baby kitten with him to a pioneer family that he knew. He told them, "This baby kitten would make a great pet for your family. Wouldn't you please take her in?" And the family said they would keep her for a pet, and sure enough, that baby kitten did make a good pet for that family.

After all, she was an ordinary little baby kitten. Give her a bowl of milk, she'd lick it up. Give her a ball of yarn, she would play with it, and jump on it, and chase it around. You know how a kitten will do.

But they noticed something funny. After about a week or so, they saw that that ball of yarn was kind of all worn down. Wasn't hardly anything of it left. They wondered what would that kitten be doing with that yarn? They peeked around corners when she didn't

know they were looking, and here they come to find that that kitten was eating that yarn. That's right. She was sucking it down.

Well, now they knew it wouldn't be good for her to eat that yarn like that. They tried to tell her not to do it. But you can't tell a wild cat what to do. They're not going to listen to you. So, she ate that ball of yarn down. It didn't seem to bother her. They gave her another ball of yarn. She started eating that one down.

After a while, they didn't think anything about it. They'd be making the supper things for the family, give the cat a ball of yarn, didn't think anything about it. They gave it no thought. They paid no attention to it. They paid it no mind. Until two years later, when that kitten came to have her first litter of her own little baby kittens, you know what I mean?

And do you know, from eating all that yarn, every one of those baby kittens that she had was born...with sweaters on!

Wait a second. Kittens born with sweaters on? You think that story could be true? I don't think so. That's not a true tale. That's a tall tale. And that's the sort of stories Johnny Appleseed used to tell.

Johnny told how he was out walking in the woods one day and he had along with him his walking stick. Now it was not this one, but it was one like it. He was walking along, looking up at the clouds and the leaves and the birds and the trees, when all of a sudden he heard a rattle in the grass. And what do you think it was? A rattlesnake? You guessed her, Chester! It was a king-sized rattlesnake. I hate to tell you what happened next.

Before Johnny could take a step backwards, or even jump out of the way, that snake jumped at him and the snake bit down with his venomous, poisonous fangs two inches deep. Two inches deep! Right into Johnny's....walking stick. That's right. The snake had bitten the walking stick.

Now Johnny Appleseed knew what was going to happen. You just ask a doctor what happens when a snake bites. Johnny Appleseed shook that snake off as fast as he could and he took off running as fast as he could go back to the pioneers. He didn't even get halfway back before that stick had begun to swell. Thicker and thicker it got. Longer and longer. Bigger and bigger from the snake poison, don't you know, until finally it was too big for Johnny to carry.

He went and got the pioneers and some horses and some chain. They all came back and hitched up that walking stick, and had the horses drag it down the road to the saw mill, where they sawed it up into logs and boards and all sorts of beams and siding and ridge poles. They took it all back and they built a whole new barn out of the boards that come just from that one walking stick.

But it was not a good idea. It was not a smart thing to do. It did not prove to be a success, because no sooner had they finished building that barn when it started to rain. The rain come down, a terrible thunderstorm. It was raining so hard that people had to jump in the river to keep from drowning. And the rain washed the poison out of those boards. Without the poison, the boards shrunk back down, smaller and smaller, littler and littler, tinier and tinier, until when the great storm had passed, there was nothing left where that whole great big barn had been. Nothing left with all the boards shrunk back down. Nothing left, I'm here to tell you. Nothing left but a pile of...popsicle sticks.

People have found many delightful ways of showing us what they think Johnny Appleseed might have looked like. Here at the museum, there is a collection of dolls and figurines, all showing us Johnny Appleseed, and yet, each different from the rest.

“What are some of the things they all have in common, Joe?”

“Well, a seed sack, bare feet, a pot hat, a walking stick, a Bible.” Lots of ways of showing us how Johnny Appleseed might have looked.

Though we don't know exactly what Johnny Appleseed looked like, we do know a lot about his life. “Tell us, Joe, what kind of people would Johnny have met out here on the frontier?”

“Well, he would have met the pioneers and the settlers who were setting up their farms and building their cabins. And Johnny would provide orchards for them.”

“What about the Indians, Joe? Was he friendly with the Indians?”

“Yes, and he knew which plants would heal the Indians' sicknesses. He also learned from the Indians their plants that would help people heal their sickness.”

“Is it true that Johnny would never kill an animal?”

“Yes, that's true. And if he would find an animal, say like a horse or a cow that was sick, he would nurse them back to health.”

“So he was sort of like a veterinarian?”

“Yes, he was. He was many things, and that would include – veterinarian, certainly.”

Johnny Appleseed's life mission was more than just planting apples. As we return to our story, we'll learn that Johnny was also a missionary, bringing hope and encouragement to the people of the frontier.

Johnny Appleseed was an educated man. He had a fine and elegant handwriting, and he was a reader, and his favorite book was the Bible. He would have described his own

profession as a gatherer and planter of apple seeds. And yet, he was something else as well.

Johnny Appleseed was a sort of self-styled missionary. Maybe he made himself in the mold of another famous John: John the Baptist. Like John the Baptist, Johnny Appleseed dressed in, well, clothes that most people wouldn't have worn. The Bible tells us that John the Baptist wore skins and furs. We know Johnny Appleseed wore rags. Both these Johns – John the Baptist and John Chapman, who we call Johnny Appleseed – both of them saw themselves as men going into the wilderness to prepare the way, prepare the way, a way for God's people in the wilderness.

Johnny Appleseed preached the Gospel. He didn't just sell apples. He exchanged ideas and insights and beliefs. Beliefs about faith, about Christianity, about God.

Day in, day out, and year by year,
From Licking Creek to the far frontier,
Johnny Appleseed comes and goes,
Comrade of every wind that blows.

The hills are his, and the winding streams,
His bark canoe and his cherished dreams,
With his sack of seeds, he goes again
Planting his orchards for other men.

Johnny Applesseed, fare you well.
Children's children have lived to tell
How their fathers trekked to the frontier's hem
And found your orchards awaiting them.

How their mothers wept with joy to see
The blossoming boughs of an apple tree.
And hearts took root in Ohio loam
And every orchard became a home.

Thanks for coming along today. I hope you had fun learning about the life of a wholesome hero: Johnny Appleseed.