



Lessons from Apple Pickers

by Jeff Reich

One day as I drove on a lonely road I came to some apple orchards. In fact, on either side of the road were thick orchards of apple trees. After some time I turned to look at them. Line after line of trees stretched back endlessly from the road, their boughs heavy with round red fruit, and the air was filled with the sweet smell of ripe apples. "This is harvest time," I thought to myself.

My wonder grew as the miles slipped by. How could the harvest be gathered? There were so many trees, so many apples! I realized that during all the hours I had driven I had seen no one. Not even a car or truck had passed me. No houses were to be seen beside the highway. There was no one picking the fruit. It was a strange feeling as I realized I was alone in a forest of apple trees.

Where Are the Apple Pickers?

But, at last I saw some apple pickers! Far from the highway, almost on the horizon, lost in the vast wilderness of unpicked fruit, I could discern a tiny group of pickers working steadily. And many miles later I saw another group. I could not be sure, but I suspected that the earth beneath me was shaking with silent laughter at the hopelessness of their task. I thought, "How are they going to pick all those apples?" Yet the pickers went on picking.

It was getting late in the day and the shadows were lengthening when, without any warning, I turned a corner of the road to see a sign which read, "Leaving Neglected Country—Entering Home Country." The contrast was so startling that I scarcely had time to comprehend the words of the notice. I had to slow down, for all at once the traffic was heavy. People by the hundreds swarmed the road and crowded the sidewalks. Even more startling was the transformation in the apple orchards—now, far from being silent and empty, they were filled with the laughter and singing of multitudes of people. Indeed, it was the people I noticed rather than the trees—people and houses. Nevertheless, the trees were still loaded with fruit, waiting to be picked.

I parked the car at the roadside and mingled with the crowd. Smart gowns, neat shoes, showy hats, expensive suits, and starched button-down shirts made me a little conscious of my work clothes. Everyone seemed so fresh, poised, and in high spirits.

"Is it a holiday?" I asked a well-dressed woman with whom I fell in step.

She looked a little startled for a moment, and then her face relaxed with a smile of gracious condescension.

This is Apple Day!!!

“You’re a stranger, aren’t you?” she said. Before I could reply, she continued, “This is Apple Day.”

“But don’t you pick apples every day?” I asked her.

“Oh, one may pick apples at any time,” she said. “We should always be ready to pick apples, but Apple Day is the day we devote especially to apple picking.”

I left her and made my way farther into the trees. Most of the people were carrying a book. Bound beautifully in leather, edged and lettered in gold, I was able to discern on the front cover of one of them the words, “Apple Picker’s Manual.”

By and by I noticed that around one of the apple trees seats had been arranged, rising upward in tiers from the ground. The seats were almost full, but as I approached the group, a smiling, well-dressed gentleman shook my hand and conducted me to a seat.

There, around the foot of the apple tree, I could see a number of people. One of them was addressing those in the seats, and just as I reached a vacant seat, everyone stood and began to sing. The man next to me shared his song book with me. It was titled, Songs of the Apple Orchards.

They sang for some time, and the song leader waved his arms with a strange and frenzied abandon, exhorting the people in the intervals between the songs to sing more and more loudly.

I grew steadily more puzzled. “When do we start to pick apples?” I asked the man who had shared his book.

“It’s not long now,” he told me. “We like to get everyone warmed up first. Besides, we want to make the apples feel comfortable.”

I thought he was joking, but his expression was serious.

Showing them How to Pick!

After a while a rather polished-looking man took over from the song leader, and after reading two sentences from his well-thumbed copy of the Apple Picker’s Manual, he began to make a speech. I wasn’t sure whether he was addressing the people or the apples.



I glanced behind me and saw a number of groups of people similar to our own group gathered around other trees here and there, being addressed by other polished, educated men. Some of the trees had no one around them.

“Which trees do we pick from?” I asked the man beside me. He did not seem to understand, so I pointed to the trees around about.

“This is our tree,” he said, indicating the one we were gathered around.

“But there are too many of us to pick from just one tree,” I stated, rather surprised. “Why, there are more people than apples!”

“But we don’t pick apples,” the man explained. “We haven’t been called. That’s the Pastor Apple Picker’s job. We’re here to support him. Besides, we haven’t been to college. You need to know how an apple thinks before you can pick it successfully—apple psychology, you know. Most of these folks here,” he went on, pointing to the congregation, “have never been to Apple Picking School.”

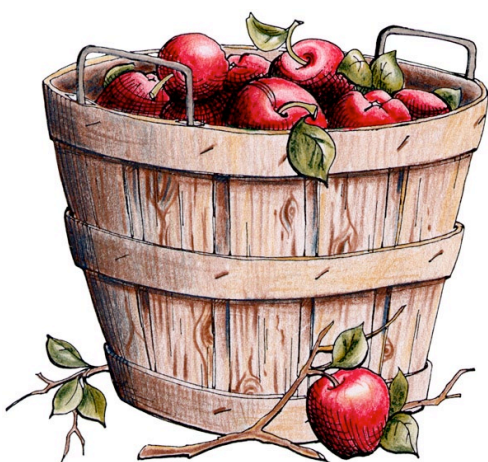
“Apple Picking School,” I whispered. “What’s that?”

“It’s where they go to study the Apple Picker’s Manual,” my informant explained. “It’s very hard to understand. You need years of study before it makes sense.”

“I see,” I sighed. “I had no idea that picking apples was so difficult.”

The man at the front was still making his speech. His face was red, and he appeared to be indignant about something. So far as I could see there was a rivalry with some of the other apple picking groups. But a moment later a glow came to his face.

“But we are not forsaken,” he said. “We have much to be thankful for. Last week we saw three apples brought into the baskets, and we are now completely debt-free from the money we owed on the new cushioned covers that grace the seats you now sit on.”



“Isn’t it wonderful?” the man next to me exclaimed. I made no reply. I felt that something must be profoundly wrong somewhere. All this seemed to be a very strange way of picking apples.

The polished man was reaching a climax in his speech. The atmosphere seemed tense. Then with a very dramatic gesture, he reached for two of the apples, plucked them from the branch, and placed them in a basket at his feet. The applause was deafening.

“Do we start the picking now?” I asked the man sitting next to me.

“What in the world do you think we’re doing?” he retorted. “What do you think this tremendous effort has been made for? There’s more apple picking talent in this group than in the rest of Home Country. Thousands of dollars have been spent on the tree you are looking at.”

I apologized quickly. "I wasn't being critical," I said. "And I'm sure the man up front must be a very good apple picker, but surely the rest of us could try. After all, there are so many apples that need picking. We've all got a pair of hands, and we could read the Manual for ourselves."

"When you've been in the business as long as I have, you'll realize that it's not as simple as that," he replied. "There isn't time, for one thing. We have our work to do, our families to care for, and our homes to look after. We. . ."

But I wasn't listening. Light was beginning to break upon me. Whoever these people were, they were not apple pickers. To them, apple picking was just a form of entertainment for their weekends.

I tried one or two more of the groups around the trees. Not all of them had such high academic standards for apple pickers. Some held classes on apple picking. I tried to tell them of the trees I had seen in Neglected Country, but they seemed to have little interest.

"We haven't picked the apples here yet," was their usual reply.

The sun was almost setting, and growing tired of the noise and activity all around me, I got in my car and began to drive back along the road by which I had come. Soon, all around me again were the vast and empty apple orchards. But there were changes. Something had happened in my absence. Everywhere the ground was littered with fallen fruit. And as I watched, it seemed that before my eyes the trees began to rain apples. Many of them lay rotting on the ground.

I felt there was something very strange about it all, and my bewilderment grew as I thought of all the people in Home Country.

Then booming through the trees, there came a voice which said, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers..."

And I awakened, for it was only a dream!

