

# Roy E. Gibson

## A Man With Vision and Courage

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East Lansing, Michigan

"Trees are living things, part of God's great creation. Each tree stands in its place, a silent but true witness. The message of the trees is given in growth of trunk, of bud, of flower, and of fruit. The combined story of many trees gives us a gradually increasing knowledge of life among the trees."

This is the opening paragraph of "The Voice of the Orchard", written in 1926 by Roy E. Gibson, horticulturist, scientist, benefactor of the fruit industry of Michigan, and humble student at the feet of Nature, who loved plants, knew plants, and spoke with and for them.

### First Interest in Bud Sports

He tells that he never remembers when he was not interested in plants. It was in 1905, however, when he was 19 years of age, that his interest in bud sports was quickened. At that time he became associated with the Greening Nursery Company of Monroe, Michigan, of which Charles E. Greening was president. Mr. Greening was a good plantsman and had given considerable thought to bud variations in fruit trees. These thoughts he passed along to Roy Gibson.

With each year, Gibson became more impressed with the importance of bud variations in the orchard. His attention was called to a block of St. John peaches planted by A. G. Spencer of Kibbie, Michigan in 1908. Mr. Spencer had observed one tree to be quite different than the other trees in the planting, being more vigorous and bearing earlier ripening fruit.

This became the original South Haven tree, introduced under that name in 1920.

### Establishment of Research and Selection

Because of the success of the bud variation work, and in furtherance of the idea that bud-wood from which fruit trees were propagated should be from individual parent trees of known and proved performances, the Research and Selection Department of the Greening Nursery Company was established in South Haven, Michigan in 1927, with Roy Gibson in charge. Special trees of standard varieties were selected in commercial orchards and a careful Tree Performance Record maintained. From this number, some trees were selected that were to be "parent trees" for budwood for the propagation of fruit trees that were to be furnished to fruit growers and become the basis of their livelihood.

### Historic Exhibit of Bud-Sports

It was at the joint meeting of the Michigan State Horticultural Society and the American Pomological Society in Grand Rapids in December of 1926 that Roy presented his now famous exhibition of bud sports. It was here, in company with my superior, the late U. P. Hedrick, himself a Michigan man, and at that time Head of the Department of Horticulture of the New York State Agriculture Experiment Station at Geneva, New York, that I first met and talked with Roy Gibson. I recall distinctly visiting about this interesting exhibit with

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Professor Hedrick and discussing the observations and results with both of them.

Historically, the meeting was of some significance. It may be recalled that at that time there was considerable controversy in both scientific and nursery circles about so-called bud sports in fruit trees and their importance in fruit growing. Professor A. D. Shamel of the U. S. Department of Agriculture located at Riverside, California, had found that trees of a given variety of orange, even though propagated by budding and grafting, showed considerable variation in the orchard. He instituted practices in roguing and bud selections in the nursery and in the orchard which standardized, stabilized and markedly improved orange production in California.

But those who worked with deciduous fruit trees, as the apple, peach, cherry, plum, and pear were inclined to discount and even discredit the thing as a so-called "pedigreed" tree among deciduous fruit trees.

And so quite innocently and perhaps with little interest in the controversy, young Gibson presented his display of variations which he had found in commercial orchards of Michigan, including russet Baldwins and R. I. Greenings, color sports of Fameuse, and a variety of other variations in tree, blossom, foliage, and fruit.

#### Recognition of Desirable and Undesirable Sports

It is only natural that Gibson's keen observation should have discovered some meritorious plant material, such as the South Haven peach, already mentioned, the Fertile Hale peach, the Graham Spy apple, The Richmorency cherry, the Early Halehaven peach, and the Sunday Elberta Peach.

But it is not in the discovery and introduction of new varieties that Roy

Gibson's greatest contribution lies. It is, instead, in the recognition of the fact that varieties do develop sports or mutations and that while desirable variations may appear and may be worthy of introduction, conversely undesirable variations may appear which must be eliminated if the standard of the variety is to be maintained.

Some of Roy Gibson's undesirable forms were clearly due to virus diseases—not well understood at that time. Others were periclinal and sectorial chimeras. It was Dr. Hedrick, so Roy recalled to me only a year or so ago, who explained to him at the meeting in Grand Rapids in 1926 that many of his interesting collections were so-called chimeras, being mixtures of two or more variations of a variety growing side by side in the same branch, bud, flower, or fruit.

#### Importance of the Work and the Man

It makes no difference to what the undesirable forms were due. The fact is that Gibson recognized them for what they were, preached about them, and instituted a program for eliminating them from the nursery and the orchard.

The truth and the value of his work are well established. His influence—quiet, modest, thorough, persistent—has been far reaching. He leaves a record of scientific achievement based upon keen observations, critical evaluation, and fervent perseverance. The record stands for all to see.

But beyond this—and this would please Roy most—there will always be in the hearts of fruit growers a feeling of deep appreciation and gratitude that there was a Roy Gibson with vision and courage and devotion to serve them as he did.

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*Remember that the meeting of the American Society for Horticultural Science will be held at East Lansing, Michigan, Sept. 6 to 8.*