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The Stearns Apple

ROBERT A. NITSCHKE[1]

It rarely happens that a great American fruit variety virtually fails to be recorded and is not given substantial recognition in the American literature of pomology. But such has been the case with Stearns,[2] an apple variety first offered for sale in 1910 which still remains, in my opinion, one of the highest quality of any of my acquaintance. And except possibly for Spigold (Red Spy x Golden Delicious), a recent introduction of the New York Agricultural Experiment Station at Geneva, it may be the finest quality of all very large apples.

Scionwood of Stearns was sent to me in the Spring of 1955 by Ira Glackens of Center Conway, New Hampshire, then Chairman, Fruit Gardens Committee, American Pomological Society. It was among some dozen or so other varieties which he recommended for the beginning of a collection of high quality apples. I quote his comments:

> "Scions from Forest Colby, an orchardist at Enfield, N.H., who had 170 varieties. Mr. Colby sent me the grafts unrequested (never heard of the apple) in a lot of other sorts and said of it: 'Size and season of Twenty Ounce. The largest apple that has quality.' "

My graft bore one magnificent huge apple in the Fall of 1957 which I picked on September 8 luckily at a stage of perfect ripeness. It was beautifully striped and splashed with dark and light red over an aquatint-like, light yellow ground with white dots on the sunny side. My notes say, "first quality—sweet rich delicate flavor—a deli-

[1]Chairman, Fruit Gardens Committee, American Pomological Society. Southmeadow Fruit Gardens, Birmngham, Michigan.

[2]The author has mentioned Stearns in articles on his favorite varieties. See Fruit Varieties & Hort. Digest 9 (1960); 19 F. V. & H. Digest 49, 63 (1965; 15 Pomona 14 (1982).

The variety has been described and pictured in the Southmeadow Fruit Gardens' catalog. Also, as grown at the National Fruit Trials in England, it is described in that monumental work by Muriel Smith, *The National Apple Register of the United Kingdom* (London, 1971), p. 547.

cious fruit. Texture crisp, breaking, juicy but at the same time fine grained, tender, melting, delicate. Finest apple in its season."

As time went on, my notes indicate it proved to be superb for pies and sauce and delicious sliced and sauteed in butter. Often there appeared specimens 12 inches to 13 inches in circumference. Always there are comments of praise: "Must be rated among best of all apples," "All members of family agree one of best," "Rates first of fall apples by taste panel."

As usual, when tasting apples, I turned to the literature for information as to such things as origin, authenticity and the appraisal of others, but Stearns was not mentioned in any of the pre-1900 works such as Downing, nor in the turn-of-the-century classics such as Beach's *The Apples of New York* (1905), nor in those works which picked up varieties since 1920 such as Hedrick's *Cyclopedia of Fruits* (1922, revised edition of 1938), or Brooks and Olmo: *Register of New Fruit and Nut Varieties 1920-1950.* A Stearn's Greening was mentioned by Downing in the third appendix of 1881 (to the revised edition of 1896) of *The Fruits and Fruit Trees of America,* but Downing described a medium size pale green apple ripening December to April. It was obviously some other variety. And this is the only reference to a "Stearns" apple in Ragan's *Nomenclature of the Apple* (1905).

How had Stearns so completely escaped notice? What was the origin of this great apple? My curiosity was aroused and I began my search by hazarding a letter to Mr. Forest Colby. He was still living in Enfield, New Hampshire. All he could tell me was that he had obtained his trees about fifty years ago from a nursery now out of business, the Van Dusen Nursery of Geneva, New York.

Fortunately a 1912 catalog of this nursery (the proprietor was W. L. McKay) was found at the L. H. Bailey Hortorium. The catalog indicated only one-year trees were available and stated the variety had been purchased from a Mr. Charles L. Stearns of Clay, New York (near North Syracuse) in January, 1910, and the first stock was budded the summer of 1911.

The catalog description, while imprecise, seemed to fit. It was called "a late fall and early winter variety." Here at Southmeadow, Stearns is picked from the tree usually from September 10 through the third week of the month. The Geneva Station regards its picking date as generally September 15. Harold Schroeder's masterful study of picking dates puts Stearns in Boonton, New Jersey, at late August. Usually Stearns hangs on the tree well past its maturity at which time it becomes mealy and tasteless. It can be eaten out of cold storage up to Christmastime. It will keep for another two or three months but loses flavor and crispness.

The variety was also described in the catalog as a regular and heavy bearer which it has been here to date. Indeed, Stearns has excellent fruiting characteristics. During the 20 years I have fruited it. Stearns has never missed a crop. The fruits are well spaced on the branches, almost never having doubles or triplets from a spur and, thus, require little or no thinning.

The catalog also referred to Stearns "having attracted very favorable notice during its test for several years at the State Experiment Station grounds." A half-tone illustration showed Stearns apple in two boxes "grown on the State Experiment Station grounds season of 1911."

Further inquiry disclosed that a Mr. Cecil Curtis McKay still lived in Geneva. He was the son of the original proprietor and had been in his father's

business from 1912 until it was discontinued in 1930.

Mr. McKay no longer had any records of the nursery but the Stearns apple he well remembered. His father had bought the propagating rights from Mr. Stearns in return for 50 budded trees of the variety. The fruit, as they grew it, was mostly large to very large. They felt the "striped coloring was attractive," liked the fruit fresh and "particularly like it cooked—cooking seemed to add to the flavor." He closed with a statement that is all too often made about high quality older American varieties: "The variety will probably become lost which is rather too bad as I agree with you that it was really one of the best varieties I knew for home use."

One can only speculate why Stearns did not become more widely known. In part it may be because at an early date in its history Stearns was not rated very high in a bulletin published by the Geneva Station. The redoubtable U. P. Hedrick, subsequently Director of the Geneva Station and editor of the classic American works now known as "The Fruits of New York" series, and his assistant, Professor Howe, said of Stearns in 1913: "of the Alexander type—no better than that variety," *Apples: Old and New* (March, 1913, New York Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 361). In this bulletin, which was a follow-up of Beach's *The Apples of New York*, published in 1905, Hedrick and Howe gave brief tabular descriptions and classifications including one-line comments on 804 apple varieties then in the Station collection.

Although tastes obviously can vary, by any standard Stearns is measurably superior to Alexander in eating quality, the latter being a coarse, inferior and second-rate apple.

One explanation, of course, is that the rating of 804 varieties is bound to result in some inconsistencies based on season, taste, attention given the variety and possibly even error. For example, Hedrick and Howe rate Somerset of New York "very good to best" but give as a written comment "without merit." They rate another of my favorite apples, Tioga, as only "good," yet the comment states "very promising, resembling Northern Spy except in color."

The variety's presence at the New York State Experiment Station now led me to Geneva. Here, through the kindness of Dr. Roger D. Way, just recently retired Chairman of the Department of Pomology and Viticulture, the station's own files on Stearns were uncovered and made available. They were a fascinating record of meticulous observations. Perhaps the most exciting fact was that Stearns came from seeds of Esopus Spitzenberg planted by orchardist C. L. Stearns of North Syracuse, New York, probably in the last 1880s or early 1890s. S. A. Beach saw a specimen at the state fair in September 1899 and noted its fine dessert quality. In the winter of 1900, at Beach's request, Stearns gave specimens of the fruit and scionwood to the station, saying in a letter to Beach, "It is a great bearer. It fetches the highest prices and is good for home use."

The grafted tree first blossomed at the station in 1908 where it bore one-half bushel of fruit. The next year, on November 30, a technical description of Stearns was made on the form utilized by the station with comments and remarks presumably in the handwriting of either Hedrick or Howe. One comment bears quoting in full. It reads: "Slightly past its season, productive. In a season of great injury by dry weather and aphis, the fruit averages large and is well colored. It would extend the season of Alexander. Worthy of testing further. Flavor and quality not high but equal to Alexander. No indication of scab. The skin is unusually clean and bright in appearance."

My experience at Southmeadow confirms two of these observations. First, by November 30, even at 33 degrees in my cold storage room, the quality of Stearns is no longer at its best. Secondly, the freedom from scab and the fine quality of the skin has been a singular feature of the Stearns apple. This year (1983), when scab is rampant in my orchard on McIntosh, the skin of Stearns is scab-free and clear even though my practice is not to spray with fungicides until after petal fall.

In 1911 the Station records note that "When cooked, flesh becomes beautifully tinged yellow and pieces retain their shape almost perfectly." By 1914 it was noted that Stearns ran smaller than Alexander and Wolf River and its quality was "no better than and, at this season, surpassed by better sorts." On another tree, however, in 1926 it was appraised as "large, very attractive, bright red striped apple of good shape; flesh coarse but crisp, tender and juicy and pleasantly flavored. Good for dessert quality and cooking; should go well on roadside or special markets."

The first tree was in an orchard abandoned in 1918. Subsequent trees were pulled out because of excess size or overcrowding but the variety has always been replanted and continually observed throughout the years. The fruit of a tree on poor, undrained soil. from 1932 to 1964, got poor marks and the tree was eventually discarded. In 1948 some storage tests were made. At 35 degrees, fruit started on September 19 showed no signs of shrivel and the flesh condition was good five months later on February 26.

Dr. Way observed Stearns for many years from two trees in the station's test orchard. He noted its size. ranging from 2¾ inches to 3½ inches in diameter, thought it was "good eating" but of doubtful commercial value for fresh fruit. He has stated that he believes Stearns would make a fine early processing apple (better than Wealthy, even though on the station grounds a tree has settled into alternate bearing) but that as a practical matter it cannot be recommended as a candidate for this purpose because it is so little grown. That it is so little grown, of course, is because the processors do not know it and there is no demand for it.

Among amateurs of my acquaintance whose opinions I value, there is a consensus that Stearns is an exceptionally superior and delicious apple.

Since there are so few very large apples with high quality that are good for both eating and cooking and since Stearns does splendidly on dwarf trees, I would always want it in my fruit garden and I would strongly recommend it for any lover of fine fruit. A more detailed description follows:

Tree—vigorous, upright, spreading, twigs stout. Regular uniform bearer of optimum number of fruits requiring no thinning. Fruit—large to very large, usually 3 - 3½ inches in diameter, roundish, oblate, sometimes one side larger than other. Stem—slender, slightly above cavity. Cavity—acute, deep with solid bronze russet radiating from bottom of cavity to top of apple. Calyx — closed, connivent, small. Basin—shallow, obtuse, symmetrical, regular. Skin—greenish yellow or yellow, heavily striped and splashed with bright or pale red sometimes becoming almost solid red in the sun when it is mottled, bright yellow where shaded by leaf or branch. Dots—rough, areolar, green or grey surrounded by light green or yellow, often large. Flesh—white, firm, crisp, breaking, very fine grained, tender, juicy, sweet, excellent flavor with enough acidity to make superb sauce and pies, the mellow transparent slices retaining their shape. Season—fall. In Detroit, Michigan, picking time throughout second and third week of September. Keeps well but loses crispness and flavor by Christmas.