

The Lewelling Nurseries: More Than Just Apples to Oregon

KIM E. HUMMER¹

Additional index words: history, pome fruits, cherries, pears, hazelnuts

Abstract

Henderson Lewelling (1809-1879), is known as the “Father of Pacific Horticulture.” He was an independent thinker, pomologist extraordinaire, skilled nurseryman, self-reliant pioneer, and family devotee. However, he “was born a ramblin’ man.” Despite this aspect of his life, or perhaps because of it, each of us across this great land who appreciate fruit and nut trees have benefitted from his wanderlust. In 1837, Henderson and his brother, John purchased land and established the first commercial tree fruit nursery in Iowa. Ten years later, Henderson and his family started on an Oregon Trail covered wagon expedition from Iowa, with about 700 trees of 35 varieties of apples, pears, cherries, peaches, plums, and small fruits. Despite all odds, 350 plants survived to reach the Willamette Valley at the end of the Oregon Trail. Lewelling’s fruit trees were the first grafted nursery stock planted on the Pacific Coast and became the foundation plant material for a burgeoning public need. In 1850, Henderson’s brother, Seth, joined him in Oregon, while his sibling, John journeyed to San Lorenzo, California. The next year, Seth established branch nurseries in Salem and Albany, Oregon, which continued to sell nursery stock throughout Oregon and Washington. In the Milwaukee orchard, the novel ‘Bing’ sweet cherry was selected from a nursery row, and has become one of the most widely grown cultivars in the U.S. In 1853, Henderson and his family moved to California and extended his nursery trade to sell more than 100,000 fruit trees throughout California. Over time, the early introduction of the fruit and nut germplasm into the Pacific Northwest by the Lewelling family nurseries has had a profound and lasting impact on modern fruit culture.

In Oregon, greenhouse and nursery crops are the second most valuable commodity, with an annual worth of about \$996 million US (OAN, 2018). How did such a thriving nursery business begin in this region? The London-based Hudson’s Bay Company established Fort Vancouver as a trading post in 1825. A cider apple orchard grew within the compound grounds. William Barlow, an immigrant in 1845, brought apple seeds with him from Illinois. He sold those seeds in the Oregon territory at 15 cents each (Carey, 1922). Despite these first fruit importation events, the primary credit for the significant nursery industry deservedly goes to Henderson Lewelling, who brought the first grafted nursery fruit trees from the eastern U.S. to Oregon, in 1847 (Carey, 1922). Lewelling’s Nursery, Milwaukee, Oregon, was the one of the first commercial fruit tree enterprises in

the Pacific Northwest and has forever influence the pomological crops produced in this region.

Lewelling Family History

First, what’s in a name? The Lewelling family genealogy includes the spelling variants Llewellyn, Luelling, and Luallen (Diamond, 2004). Over the years, Henderson Lewelling used different spellings of his surname. He began using “Luelling” about 1850 (Diamond, 2004). His family histories in North Carolina, Indiana, and Iowa use the “Lewelling” spelling only; California biographies, including online sources use “Luelling;” Oregon records use both. Here, for consistency, Lewelling will be used.

The Lewelling family are scions of Wales. Their Welsh ancestors were a sturdy, hardy stock who comprised an independent clan

¹ USDA National Clonal Germplasm Repository, Corvallis, Oregon 97333

that resisted the tyranny the Roman invasion as well as that of English kings (Garretson, 1929). The family immigrated early to America with several generations existing here prior to recorded history. Early records indicate that the American branch of the family began in North Carolina and that they had converted to the peaceful ways of the Society of Friends (Quakers). Henderson's grandfather was pious and versed in Biblical literature. His three sons were Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego. Meshack, Henderson's father, was a practicing physician, nurseryman, and farmer. Henderson grew up in Randolph County, North Carolina, an area that remains known for apples and horticultural production. In 1825, Meshack and his neighbors were attracted to reports of going west – to Indiana. Meshack sold his holdings in North Carolina, and began the pioneer trek through the Cumberland Gap to the “promised” land of Indiana. Meshack had been a slaveholder in North Carolina. He took his slaves with him to Indiana and set them free.



Figure 1. Henderson Lewelling, pioneer nurseryman.

This was consistent with the traditions of the Lewellings (California Families, 2011).

Upon arrival in Indiana, Meshack purchased land, started a nursery, and resumed his medical practice. Henderson was 16 years-old when he arrived in Greensboro, Indiana with his family and worked on their family farm for several years. In 1830, he married Miss Elizabeth Presnell, another Quaker originally from North Carolina.

Henderson and his brother John went into the nursery business together. They began to hear glowing accounts of new western ventures – this time westward to the Blackhawk Purchase, Iowa. Henderson was determined to move, so he and his brother secured land near Salem, Iowa in 1837. There they established the first commercial fruit tree nursery in that state (Thompson, 1991). That part of Iowa was rapidly being settled by Quakers and others homesteaders who purchased apples, pears, peaches, plums, cherries, and fruiting shrubs for their claims. Almost every homesteader in and around Lee County purchased fruit trees from the popular Lewelling Nursery. During the next decade, Henderson and his family returned to Indiana more than 14 times to secure the best fruit trees and plants available, and bring them back to their business in Salem, Iowa.

Apple production near Salem became so abundant that shipping this fruit became a regular business from August through frost in the fall. There were fruit growers that took fruits to market in Ottumwa, Oskaloosa, Newton, Marshaltown, Cedar Rapids, and points in between. Henderson Lewelling (Figure 1, Figure 2)) was one of the leading citizens of the community for almost a decade (Garretson, 1929).

Then, situations changed. The Lewellings were strong and active opponents of slavery; many members of their church were not so strongly opposed. A rift formed within the church and a new church, called the Anti-Slavery Friends, formed. The Society of Friends disowned Henderson and his family because of their activist stance. Henderson



Figure 2. Henderson Lewelling House, Underground Railroad stop, US National Park, Salem, Iowa

sat as the head of the meeting of this new Anti-Slavery Friends.

The stone house that Henderson built in 1840 (Richter, 2005) was a stop on the Underground Railroad (Berrier, 2006). Henderson added hidden doors in the kitchen, a closet, and a side room. The family had rag rugs that revealed steps leading down to tunnels in the crawlspace to conceal fugitives (Richter, 2005). The Underground Railroad was an organized system for helping escaped slaves from the southern states reach freedom in the north. The Henderson Lewelling house is one of five Underground Railroad safe houses in Iowa preserved to this day. It is now a museum in the National Park system in Salem, Iowa.

Pioneer Expedition to Oregon

Henderson was not satisfied with being a great citizen and successful businessperson in Iowa. He had read the accounts by Lewis and Clark, the expeditions of John C. Fremont, and emigrant reports about the wonders of the Willamette Valley. As early as 1845, he determined to go to the Oregon Territory. For the next two years, he sold his property and planned the way to carry living

grafted trees with him to the Pacific Coast.

According to an account by his son, Alfred Lewelling, “They had procured a stout wagon and made two boxes twelve inches [30 cm]-deep and of sufficient length and breadth that set in the wagon box side by side. These boxes were filled with a compost consisting principally of charcoal and earth, into which about 700 trees and shrubs, embracing most, if not all of the best varieties in cultivation in that section of the country were planted. The trees were from twenty inches [31 cm] to four feet [122 cm]-high and protected from stock by light stripe of hickory bolted to posts set in staples on the wagon box. Three yoke of good cattle drew that wagon.” The wagon contained apples, pears, plums, cherries, quince, grapes, and other shrub fruits (Garretson, 1929).

The Henderson family and trees began the journey west on 17 Apr. 1847, in three wagons. Several other friends and families began the journey with seven wagons in their train. Henderson’s traveling companions sought to persuade him to abandon his “traveling nursery.” He said, “No!” and remained firm and determined, though he met many obstacles

and hardships along the way. While several families also started with Henderson, the weight of the traveling nursery slowed the progress of the Lewelling wagons. Henderson and his family fell way behind. As William Toney, a pioneer who traveled across the plains when he was 22 states it "Everyone thought [Henderson Lewelling] was some kind of fool for bringing his travelling nursery across the plains." (Gormley, 2007)

Several oral references describe an encounter of Henderson's wagons with a war party of Native Americans, perhaps the Cayuse, who camped nearby (McClintock, 1967; Lampman, 1953; Diamond, 2004). The Native Americans believed that the Great Spirit lived in the trees. They believed that a man who crossed the wilderness with a wagon-load of trees must be under special care of the Great Spirit, and did not harm him or his family. Other pioneers were not as fortunate. With an epidemic of measles rampant in the Cayuse tribe, the native peoples thought that the immigrants were poisoning them. In retaliation, war parties attacked wagon trains and killed newcomers. They saved the Lewellings when they saw the trees, and, according to some accounts, helped the Henderson Lewelling train successfully on its way. Alfred Lewelling's account of the travel was described by Garretson (1929). Unfortunately, Henderson's journal did not survive the passage of time.

In early Oct. 1847, Henderson's group arrived at the Dalles, Oregon. He and his team constructed boats to ferry the wagons and traveling nursery down the Columbia River. At that point, Henderson took the trees out of their boxes, wrapped them in cloth to protect them from damage during handling and from the frosty nights. The bundles were carefully placed in boats to ford the treacherous rapids on the Columbia River. At the Lower Cascades, Native Americans were employed to carry the load by canoe to Fort Vancouver. The Lewelling Family reached Fort Vancouver on 17 Nov., 7 months from the beginning of this journey.

By 10 Dec. 1847, Henderson found a temporary home for the family in east Portland, and by 5 Feb., he found a permanent location for the nursery in Milwaukie, Oregon. Despite negative predictions from his friends, Henderson reached his goal. His family survived, including his wife, nine children (including a newborn child, Oregon Columbia Lewelling, delivered en route) and half of the trees. He brought his cargo of living trees across the plains and over the Rocky Mountains to the Willamette Valley. Henderson became the first nursery person to supply grafted, quality fruit trees to people in the Pacific Northwest (Garretson, 1929).

Soon after he established himself in Oregon, Lewelling formed a partnership with William Meek, a man from Bonaparte, Iowa, who crossed the plains, in 1847. Meek became his son-in-law. Their firm engaged extensively in the nursery business, but also organized the Milwaukie Milling Company, and operated several saw and gristmills. The Lewellings were quite successful for the next six years selling nursery trees throughout Oregon and in the Puget Sound area. Within several years, he had 100,000 trees for sale at \$1 to \$1.50 each (Rego, 2013). The nursery supplied trees for the settlers who came to Oregon following the passage of the Donation Land Claim Act in 1850 (Dolan, 2009). Planting a tree confirmed that a homesteader meet the "residency" standards for the land claim. Lewelling's trees became very popular; they were the foundation of the great fruit tree industry of the Pacific Northwest.

Seth Lewelling is credited with starting the distribution of walnut and hazelnut trees in Oregon (Schuster, 1944). Seth Lewelling, stated that Henderson imported 'Cob' filbert nuts from England and 'Red Aveline' filbert nuts from Hapsburg, Austria (Schuster, 1944).

The nursery firm Lewelling and Meek developed four branch stations, one on the Long Tom River (between present day Eugene and Monroe, OR) and another near Albany, OR. Schuster (1944) conjectures that the oldest

Oregon hazelnut trees came through these nurseries.

In an oral account from J.M. Hedden, born in Scottsburg, OR, a Scottsburg resident named Joe Haines claimed that in the early 1850's he freighted a load of tanned leather to Marysville (now Corvallis) and traded it for a load of fruit trees including walnuts and filberts. These nut trees were brought to Scottsburg and planted on the Edward Spicer Donation Land Claim, owned by T. J. Andrew (Schuster, 1944). Schuster estimated that these trees were planted between 1854 and 1857. The European hazelnut tree planted on the T. J. Andrew property is notably one of the oldest in Oregon, and is still extant. Two additional hazelnut trees dating to that time period grow on the Levi Scott Donation Land Claim in the town of Scottsburg (Hummer, 2001).

Expansion of Nurseries in the Pacific Northwest

When Lewelling and Meek were selling trees in all parts of Oregon and Washington, John Lewelling became motivated to move west (California Families, 2011). He and his family left from Salem, IA, on the California trail in 1850. John bought property at San Lorenzo, Alameda County. In 1864, after working successfully in the nursery trade with Henderson for 14 years, John Lewelling moved to St. Helena in Napa Valley where he was a pioneering winegrower. He established Lewelling Vineyards.

In 1853, Henderson Lewelling sold his Oregon interests to his partner William Meek. Seth Lewelling and his family remained in Oregon, though Henderson and his son Alfred and their families moved to Alameda County, California. Henderson bought 20 ha in the southern end of Alameda County, only to find out that the title to the property was invalid. They uprooted the orchard and moved to 162 ha on Sausal Creek, which at the time was 8047 m from the Oakland boundary (Rego, 2013).

Alfred named the new locality Fruitvale

and graded a road, still called Fruitvale Avenue, into their property. California was a popular destination for immigrants and a large population settled in that vicinity. Fruitvale continues to be a popular neighborhood of Oakland, CA. From the Fruitvale nursery site, Henderson and Alfred Lewelling shipped hundreds of thousands of fruit trees throughout California.

Henderson's first wife died in Milwaukie in childbirth. He married twice more, and became a widower both times. He remarried for a fourth time (Rego, 2013) and had one remaining "wonderlust" scheme left. In 1859, Henderson sold his Fruitvale property and he and his two younger sons, with their partners and families, left to start a utopian homestead in the Honduras. Unlike his other ventures, this was not a financial success. Within 2 years, Henderson returned to California. In 1860, his former wife, who he had left in California, divorced him, and he lived with his in-laws for the remainder of his life. In Dec. 1878, he died in the field while planting more trees (Rego, 2013). Henderson was buried in Oakland, California. His tombstone commemorates him as "Father of Pacific Horticulture."

Lasting Influences

The Lewelling family nurseries have left lasting impacts on horticulture, from unique and valuable single trees, to the nurseries, as well as stimulating fruit production and distribution industries.

One account (Olympia Historical Society, 2020) describes a now historic tree called the "David Chambers Prairie Cherry Tree." In 1845, Henderson Lewelling planted a cherry seed which germinated. In 1846, he grafted this seedling with 'Black Tartarian'. This 'Black Tartarian' tree traveled on Lewelling's wagon train west to the Willamette Valley. In 1849, this tree was sold to David Chambers for \$5. Mr. Chambers carried the tree by canoe down the Willamette River to the Columbia, to the Cowlitz River landing. The tree then traveled by horseback 70 miles

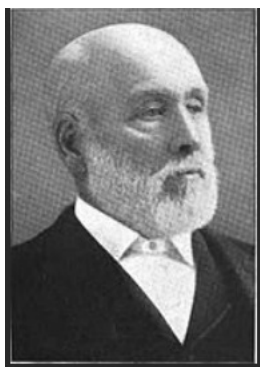


Figure 3. Seth Lewelling, pioneer nurseryman and fruit grower

to Chambers Prairie, four miles from Olympia, Washington, where it was planted. Eventually, it became an immense tree with a 2.7 m-diameter and a 18 m limb-spread. In 1920, the cherry yield was 544 kg.

Meanwhile, in Milwaukie, Oregon, Seth Lewelling's farm contributed greatly to Pacific Coast Horticulture. While his father roamed southward to California and beyond, Seth (Figure 3) settled in Oregon's great farming country producing prunes, apples, and cherries. With such a growth opportunity, the Pacific West needed laborers. An influx of Chinese workers who came to build train tracks, work in mines, also began to work in the Lewelling orchards and fields.

One Chinese worker at Seth Lewelling's Farm was Mr. Ha Binh (Ewbank, 2018). He was a tall Manchurian who stood more than 6' in stature. He was different from the most of the Chinese workers who came from Guangdong Province in southern China. Binh worked for more than 30 years with the Lewellings, sending part of his wages to his family in China. Binh was the supervisor of Lewelling's orchard 30 man crew. He worked closely with Lewelling on grafting, propagating and caring for trees. One day Lewelling and Binh were walking their cherry rows. In one of Ha Binh's row's, a novel type of cherry was found. Someone suggested to Seth to name the cherry after himself, but he

said, "No, I'll name this for Bing." (The Anglicized form 'Bing' was used for the cherry name rather than the closer Chinese transliteration.) The 'Bing' cherry, pedigree 'Black Republican' x 'Napoleon Bigarreau', came into being. The 'Bing' cherry won horticultural prizes and early on the fruit sold for as much as \$1/lb [454 g].

Violence against Chinese laborers flourished in the Pacific Northwest. Seth Lewelling sheltered his Chinese workers in his home. In 1882, the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred the immigration of Chinese laborers. In 1889, Ha Binh took the opportunity to return to China to visit his family. Because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Mr. Binh never returned to the US (Ewbank, 2018).

The 'Bing' cherry continues to be a primary cultivar grown in central and eastern Oregon. In these drier regions, fruit cracking is not as problematic as in the wetter Willamette Valley. This cultivar is widely planted in WA, CA, and OR, the three largest cherry producing states in the US. In 2015, 'Bing' represented 36% of the cherry production in the US (Long, 2020). 'Bing' remains one of the best cherries in the world because of the distinctive flavor, firm flesh, dark red color, and long lasting glossiness. It has been used in many crosses for cherry improvement since then. Offspring of 'Bing' include 'Rainier', 'Chinook', and Vic. 'Bing' is also a grand-parent of E8-79, 'Brooks', AA, BB, CC, DD, EE, GG, JJ, and is a great-grand-parent of 'Selah' (Rosyara et al., 2014).

Conclusions

Henderson, Seth, Alfred, and John Lewelling and their families were great American pioneers. Their training in technical horticultural practices and techniques and their great energy and entrepreneurial spirit contributed bountiful fruit to feed our expanding nation. During the 1800's, their collective efforts brought plant nursery and fruit growing techniques to the west coast and provided access to the best plant materials not only to North

Carolina, Indiana, Iowa, Oregon, Washington, and California but throughout our country. The Lewelling legacy lives on in every fruit-growing district and homeowner backyard today in the wealth of temperate fruit germplasm now grown in the Pacific Northwest and across America.

Literature cited

- Berrier, G. G. 2006. Encyclopedia of the Underground Railroad/John Todd and the Underground Railroad: Biography of an Iowa abolitionist. pp 259-262 in: The Annals of Iowa 65. State Historical Society of Iowa.
- California Families 2011. Henderson and Seth Lewelling. 19 June 2020. <http://cafamilies.org/lewelling/henderson.html>.
- Carey, C. H. 1922. History of Oregon. Vol. 1. The Pioneer Historical Publishing Co., Chicago.
- Diamond, D. 2004. Migrations: Henderson Luelling and the cultivated apple, 1822-1854. Northern Arizona University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, Flagstaff, AZ.
- Dolan, Susan A. 2009. Fruitful legacy: a historic context of orchards in the United States, with technical information for registering orchards in the national register of historic places. U.S. National Park Service / Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation. Boston, MA.
- Ewbank, A. 2018. The tragic roots of America's favorite cherry. Gastro Obscura. 18 July 2020. <<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/bing-cherry>>.
- Garretson, O.A. 1929. The Lewelling family pioneers. Iowa Journal of History and Politics. Vol.21:1-16 .
- Gormley, M.V. 2007. Prospecting for genealogical gold out west. ancestry.com as cited in http://cafamilies.org/lewelling/tree_wagon.html 2 August 2020.
- Hummer, K.E. 2001. Historical notes on hazelnuts in Oregon. Acta Hort. 556: 25-28.
- Lampman, E.S. (1953). Tree Wagon. Doubleday, NY.
- Long, L. (2020). Bing cherry. The Oregon encyclopedia. 18 July 2020. https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/bing_cherry/#author-1000090-info.
- McClintock, T.C. (1967). Henderson Luelling, Seth Lewelling, and the birth of the Pacific Coast fruit industry. Oregon Historical Quarterly 68:153-174.
- Olympia Historical Society. 2020. Chambers prairie cherry tree 18 July 2020. <https://olympiahistory.org/chambers-prairie-cherry-tree-3222015/>.
- Oregon Association of Nurseries (OAN) 2018. Oregon's nursery industry: an economic force. 3 August 2020. <https://www.oan.org/page/economicforce#:~:text=Helping%20Oregon's%20economy,and%20greenhouse%20products%20in%202018>>.
- Rego, N. 2013. The Mercury News. Days gone by: In 1854, 'traveling orchardist' Henderson Lewelling establishes Fruit Vale site. 3 August 2020. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2013/12/12/days-gone-by-in-1854-traveling-orchardist-henderson-lewelling-establishes-fruit-vale-site/>.
- Richter, S. 2005. History lies underground. Burlington (IA) Hawk Eye. June 13, 2005 p. 322 in Snodgrass, M.E. The Underground Railroad: an encyclopedia of people, places, and operations. Routeledge, Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York.
- Rosyara, U.R., A. M. Sebolt, C. Peace, and A.F. Iezonni. 2014. Identification of the paternal parent of 'Bing' sweet cherry and confirmation of descendants using single nucleotide polymorphism markers. J. Amer. Soc. Hort. Sci. 139(2):148-156.
- Schuster, C. E. 1944. Notes on the history of nut production in the Pacific Northwest. Oregon State Horticultural Society. 36th Ann. Rpt. pp 99-103.
- Thompson, P.B. 1991. Henderson Luelling. Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, 6 vol. University of North Carolina Press. 20 July 2020. ncpedia.org/biography/luelling-henderson.