

Van Mons Leon Le Clerc—A Sugar and Cream Pear

ISSAC R. HUNTER* AND ROBERT A. NITSCHKE**

Some years ago, a neighbor of Isaac Hunter, near Dowagiac, Michigan, brought him some pear scions for grafting a new tree. The old tree (the neighbor called it his father's "Russet Pear" tree) was approximately one hundred years old, and there were two more trees the same age in the area. What made it of special interest was that the neighbor said his family was accustomed to eating this pear with sugar and cream, a treat usually reserved for strawberries and peaches or perhaps bananas. The next October, specimens were obtained from the old tree. The large, long, dull, yellowish brown fruits with tracings of russet were grand eating out of hand, buttery smooth and soft, sweet, but with just a bit of acid—probably the reason the pear went well with sugar and cream.

The trees were weak growers, subject to leaf troubles, mostly scab, and the fruit dropped badly in dry seasons. "Russet" was obviously a local or family designation, but no one in the neighborhood could be found who knew the real name of this delicious pear.

Then a copy of Hedrick's *The Pears of New York* (1921) came to hand. When first thumbing through its pages and the beautiful colored photographs, there suddenly leaped to the eye what was unmistakably our "Russet Pear" bearing the name "Leon Le Clerc (Van Mons)." The technical descriptions of tree, twigs and buds seemed to fit, and further examination of specimens showed the same oblong pyriform shape; one inch long, thick, curved stem; large open calyx; roughened by russet specks and tracings

and numerous small russet dots; and the flesh, "nearly melting, juicy, sub-acid or with a peculiar sprightliness."

Hedrick said, "a century ago this pear was being heralded in Europe as the best of all pears." He mentioned its great susceptibility to scab fungus which kept it from taking high rank in America, mentioned its size and beauty when "well-grown in a congenial environment," and concluded that it was a variety "suitable only for collections."

Hedrick's brief discussion of its history and the origin of its peculiar name, "Van Mons Leon Le Clerc," warranted a review of the references to this variety in the literature of pom-



Fig. 1. Van Mons Leon Le Clerc, an old high quality pear from Belgium.

*Member, Fruit Gardens Committee, of Dowagiac, Michigan.

**Chairman, Fruit Gardens Committee, of Birmingham, Michigan.

ology. What was found only adds interest to the "rediscovery" of this delicious pear.

Leon Le Clerc was born in Brussels in 1765, became a Deputy from the Department of Maine in that little corner of France adjoining Brittany and Normandy, and received the diploma of Doctor from the Faculty of Medicine in Paris. But his grand passion was breeding fruits. At one time he had as many as 80,000 seedlings growing in his plantings near the town of Laval. And from a seedling of the variety Beune d'Arenberg he fruited in 1835, at the age of 70, what he thought was a "magnificent fruit."

Specimens for appraisal were sent to his friend, Van Mons, the renowned Belgian horticulturist, and perhaps the most famous pear breeder of all times, with the request that Le Clerc be permitted to dedicate the pear to Van Mons. Van Mons agreed, according to Le Clerc, who reported that Van Mons thought that "the pear was in every respect of first rank, but in a refinement of politeness insisted that I include the name of the originator after his." Hence, Van Mons Leon Le Clerc.

In the fall of 1838, LeClerc sold his entire stock to one Rene Langlier, a nurseryman from St. Hillier on the Isle of Jersey. In December of 1838, Langlier exhibited the pear at the London Horticultural Society. Mr. Robert Thompson, of Chiswick, author of the *Gardner's Assistant* and in charge of the Fruit Department of the Society, which at that time had fruited over 677 pears in its collection, pronounced it to be "the best pear in the world." Mr. John Loudon, author of the famous *Encyclopedia of Gardening* and editor of *The Gardener's Magazine*, praised its size and its flavor "partaking of the pineapple" and adjudged it "the best pear in existence."

After such an auspicious introduction, M. Langlier commenced selling trees for one guinea a piece, an unheard-of price. Another French nurseryman, who had a large stock of another pear called Leon Le Clerc de Laval, which was a stewing pear raised much earlier by Van Mons, named after his fellow-breeder in France, took advantage of the similarity in the names and began selling his trees at these fabulous prices. For some time confusion existed about the two varieties.

The fame of the pear soon reached New England where pomology was flourishing. In the winter of 1840-41, William Kenrick, the Boston horticulturist and author of the *New American Orchardist* brought in scions of Van Mons Leon Le Clerc which, when grafted upon the quince, fruited in three years. Kenrick wrote of its "melting, very rich, sugary flavor," and scions were given to his friends, including Colonel Wilder, then President of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, later to become the first President of the American Pomological Society. Wilder also had a high regard for the pear.

In the First Report of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society (1857) is a splendid colored plate of the pear, and reference is made to the fine specimens exhibited in the Hall of the Society. C. M. Hovey, Editor of the *Magazine of Horticulture* and of *The Fruits of America* (1852), also showed a colored plate of this pear, praised its "rich, brisk, vinous, perfumed, and delicious flavor" and said "it may be truly ranked among the best."

Indeed, every pomologist who has observed this fine fruit, has seemed equally impressed with its quality. Leroy spoke of its "exquisite flavor;" De Mortillet, in his *Les Meilleurs Fruits* (1868), Vol. 3 on Pears, said "as to quality positively among the

best . . . invaluable for the amateur;" the careful Bunyard, in 1920, referred to its "delicious Bergamot flavor;" and the recent magnificent seven volume Romanian work, **Pomologia Republicii Populare Romine**, of which Vol. III on pears was published in 1964, describes it as "of premiere quality . . . juicy, fondant, vinous, surgary with an agreeable aroma."

If any additional proof of its high esteem were needed, it may be found in the number of colored plates which have been published of this pear. In addition to those already mentioned are: **Annales de Pomologie Belge** (1857); **Pomologie de la France** (1860); **Mas, Le Verger** (1865); **Decaines, Le Jardin Fruitier** (1871); **The Florist and Pomologist** (1866); **Hogg and Bull's Herefordshire Pomona** (1876); **Lauche, Deutsche Pomologie** (1883).

Why, then, has this highly-praised variety disappeared from the American scene? Hedrick's explanation undoubtedly holds true. Early, its cultural deficiencies became clear. Downing noted that it cankered badly; Barry, that it must have "rich warm soil;" Thomas, that "its value is nearly destroyed by its liability to crack and canker;" Mas, that the wood is often sickly and the flowers easily affected by bad weather; De Mortillet, that where exposed to heat the fruit atrophies and falls off.

Nonetheless, the amateur and fruit hobbyist can take the pains to have a rare and delicious pear such as Van Mons Leon Le Clerc. It is interesting to note that neither the pear scion list published in the **Fruit Variety and Horticultural Digest** (Spring, 1956) nor the **Clonal Pear Stock Inventory** published by the United States Department of Agriculture (July, 1964) record the existence of this variety. We wonder how many more fine old fruit varieties can be found or rediscovered in old orchards and farms throughout America.

Register of New Fruit and Nut Varieties in Financial Trouble

The Executive Committee and a group of interested members of A. P. S. met with the Fruit Breeding Committee of the Amer. Soc. for Hort. Science in Davis, Cal., this past August. We were told by Dr. H. P. Olmo, of the University of California, who prepares the Register, that unless some \$2700 can be found to pay clerical and stenographic expenses, the Register could not be continued.

The A. P. S. Executive, with the support of the members present, agreed to contribute a grant of \$500.00 for the financing of the Register.

All persons who are benefiting from the Register are urged to make personal contribution, and send their checks made payable to the American Society for Horticultural Science, Register of New Fruit and Nut Varieties Project, to George Oberle, Dept. of Hort. V. P. I., Blacksburg, Va. 24061.

—G. M. Kessler, President

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