

The Webb of Life

BY JEN SCOTT

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The Rangers walks in the Avon Peninsula have often skirted an abandoned orchard that was started by Bill Webb. Bill passed away before the trees were planted, but his son Paul Webb, and Basil Robarts finished the job. Every time we pass it, someone comments on the potential fruit production. In the winter we have gone past it on skis and tasted the frozen apples still hanging in the trees. The season for apple harvest is upon us again. A good time to share a Peninsula orchard story.

Anyone who has driven through Avondale will notice two beautiful white mansions with green trim. Between them is a small road that leads past an apple warehouse, and an orchard of apples, cherries, plums, pears, and even quince trees. Past the orchard are hayfields, hedgerows, and dyke land. It is a beautiful place to walk – magical even. At the end of the land is a running dyke that protects it from the Avon River's tides. From the top of the running dyke one can see the river with its muddy banks and variety of bird life. Windsor and Falmouth are in the background, but a prominent feature of the town's waterfront is the large brick apple storage warehouse by the rail line – a testament to the days when tree fruit production was a major economic activity in the area.

William (Bill) Webb was an immigrant from Devon England who came to the Kentville area, where he began work on fruit farms. Eventually he moved to Avondale, an area that reminded him of the hills and tidal rivers of Devon.

Bill worked the Mounce orchard in Avondale for 27 years in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. This was a time when orchards were sprayed with DDT, and heavy metals, to control fruit pests. Although the Mounce orchard was sprayed with fungicides to control scab and other fungal diseases, Bill was reluctant to spray insecticides, because the 'good bugs' would be killed along with the pests. He spent a lot of time observing the trees, insects, and other life in the beautiful orchard by the Avon River. Bill's son John tells me

that pest management was based on good fertility, proper pruning, and protection of the beneficials. These included insects, birds, and other organisms in the soil. Both of Bill's sons, Paul and John independently told me that researchers from the Kentville agricultural station would come to see their father on a regular basis to hear about his latest observations and discuss orchard management.

"Dad was always out-observing, and he would come up with ways of doing things that those guys in Kentville were interested in," notes Paul. For example, on the yellow delicious apple, a fungus would cause dots on the apple. If the fungicide was sprayed before the sun hits it – first thing in the morning – it would be effective. If sprayed after, it was ineffective. Paul used to see his father out in the orchard counting the bugs on the leaves. He was very interested in how the populations of pests and beneficial bugs balanced out. I asked Paul, a bit of a historian, if there was any record of his father's work or observations in the orchard. "No," he said, "nothing."

During the time when he managed the orchard, Bill would hire picking crews of 12 to 14 people every year to harvest the crop. "In the 50s it was all men," explains John, "but in the 60s and 70s, it was all women." In the 60s, the men had better opportunities in construction, so women took over the harvesting jobs.

The apples were moved around the farm and stored in wooden barrels. "Those barrels were heavy!" remarks John as he shakes his head. The barrels were mostly brought in from the Chester Road. Paul remembers the loads being dropped off at the farm. "When I was a kid, I usually had two or three days to make forts out of them before they got hauled away for orchard use." Black ash was used so much for apple barrels in those days, the tree is a rarity now in the province. Except on the Peninsula, where I see them growing in the woods, along brooks and in wetter ground.

While the overseas shipping of apples was short-lived, the fruit was sold for many years to individual grocery stores. Dropped fruit

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was gathered up and brought to the juice plant in Hantsport. In later years, when the grocery business became amalgamated, and head offices wanted fewer suppliers, the Mounce orchard fruit supply was no longer sold to individual stores. For the past few years, the fruit has been just dropping and rotting.

Between the warehouse and the larger Mounce mansion, there is a small road through the orchard, leading towards the house where Bill Webb and his family lived, and the Avondale cemetery. Along the way are quince trees – a rarity in modern orchards. While I favour the spicy flavour of quince in applesauce, John Webb remembers putting quince in his closet because it smelled so good. John also mentioned that although they didn't grow peaches commercially, his father would have a few peach trees interspersed throughout the orchard to have some for his family. They were too precious to sell. And where is the strawberry apple? – a particularly tasty variety John remembers from his childhood. Bill also grew "too damn many raspberries," according to John. The cherries were always popular with Halifax families of Italian descent. They would come with picnics and "make a day of it". Eating, socializing, picking cherries. The

same families came back year after year.

I had to ask about the cider-making. "Yes," recalls Paul, "we made cider." He is talking about hard cider – the alcoholic kind, even though I was thinking of the sweet kind. "Takes the legs right out from under you." John also recalled the effect of drinking hard cider. "Makes your legs go." This was also confirmed by Raymond Parker, a friend of the Webbs who lived across the road at Roseway Farm. I guess there were some good parties in Avondale. He also confirmed that the Webbs have always been lively storytellers.

In the 80s, when Paul was packing up to go work out west, he had a guest from the UK named Rosamund. She was in the area to study wool arts from the Zilligs in nearby Scotch Village. She was also a student of things spiritual. Apparently she got up one morning at sunrise and danced on William Webb's grave in the cemetery bordering the Mounce orchard. She came back to Paul and said: "your father spoke to me. He said 'hey' three times and another word I couldn't make out." Paul was astounded, because his father's greeting for his friends was always "hey hey hey shakes!"

Webb's gravestone reads, "He lived life with a joyful spirit and so gave joy to all who knew him."