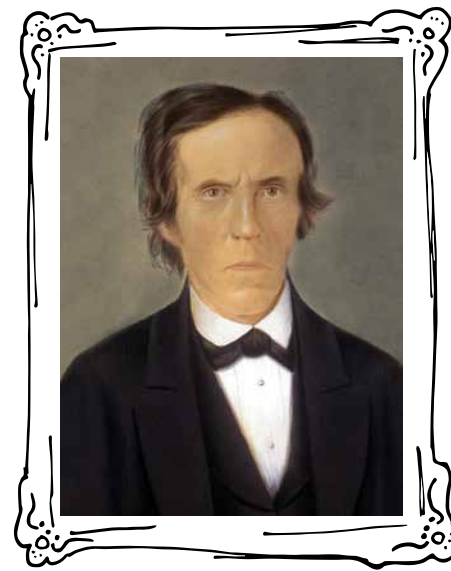


# THE APPLE THAT FELL FAR FROM THE TREE

*Inside Stark Bro's Nurseries & Orchards Co. two-hundred-year history.*

BY ALEX STEWART

DOLLAR PHOTO CLUB



## IT MAY COME AS

a surprise to learn that the man, the myth, the legend, Johnny Appleseed, only did about half the work. Although the legendary man is given most of the credit for the spread of apples we see in grocery stores today, the man truly responsible for some of America's favorite varieties of apple was never immortalized in children's fables and American lore. His name, property, and legacy of innovation lives on in his nursery, though, now one of the oldest in the nation.

Whether you know it or not, Stark Bro's Nurseries & Orchards Co. has made a significant impact on your fruit diet. If not for the Stark family, the Gala, Golden Delicious, and Red Delicious apples would have never made it big, and if not for the latter two varieties, sixty percent of the apples currently available in grocery stores would have never come to fruition.

## JIMMY APPLESEED

Before there were railroads, and before there was a Wild West, even before there was a Missouri, there was Stark Bro's. Its history goes back six generations of Starks, plus a new era of ownership under the current president, Cameron Brown. Now a purveyor of fruit trees, nut trees, landscape trees and shrubs,



**Left:** James Hart Stark founded Stark Bro's Nursery, now celebrating its two-hundredth anniversary. **Above:** Workers take a break from working at Stark Bro's in 1900.

berry plants and vines, garden plants, roses, and more, the company's beginnings were not so widespread.

James Hart Stark was born in 1792, the second of nineteen children. An early adapter of the ideals of westward expansion, a young Stark left his hometown of Hutchinson, Kentucky, in 1816 in search of greener pastures. He brought with him a bag full of Jeniton apple scions—a cutting or twig with buds used to graft onto a compatible rootstock—crossed the Mississippi, and settled in Missouri, which would become a state five years later.

At the time, no one believed it was possible to grow good apples in Missouri soil. However, Stark proved them wrong when he grafted the precious scions onto local crabapple trees.

In the early nineteenth century, people were not accustomed to good fruit. When you fail to graft apples from their parent tree, you could end up with junk trees, explains LeAnn Zotta, author of *200 Years and Growing: The Story of Stark Bro's Nurseries & Orchards Co.* Stark's product, in contrast, was extraordinary. His expert knowledge of grafting, along with the fertile river silt, made the fruits of his labor legendary.

"What resulted was an orchard full of Jeniton trees, and people came from miles around, not only to get the fruit, but to get the trees," she says.

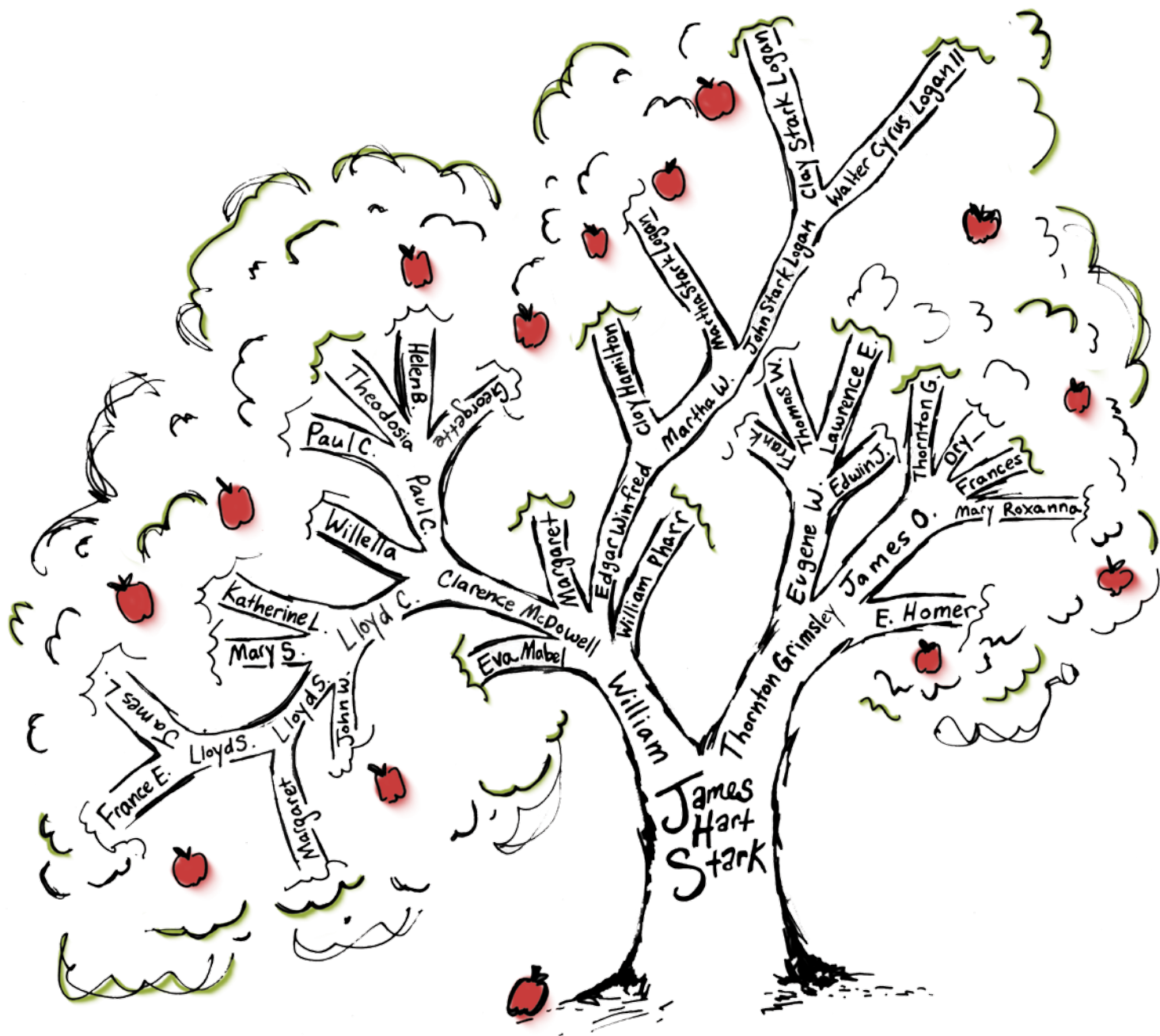
With the dawn of the railroad, Stark's goods were demanded nationwide.

Now in its two-hundredth year, Stark Bro's consists of 677 growing acres in Missouri and Illinois, five acres of greenhouses, and two million cubic feet of warehouse space. In peak season, it employs 275 people, who ship one million trees a year.

## PLANTING FAMILY ROOTS

A painted portrait of James Hart Stark depicts a man with unkempt dark hair and a furrowed brow. The corners of his mouth are turned down, and his light brown eyes make you feel as though he's scolding you. Stark was a Pike County judge for four years, and though he served only one term, he preferred to be called "Judge" until he died in 1873.

James Stark's son, William, eventually took the reins at the tender age of fourteen. He studied his father and the enterprise closely, making him a widely respected and knowledgeable horticulturist in his day. It was he who moved the nursery from Buffalo Township to its current location due to the convenience of the railroad. The completion of the Illinois



Central Railroad to St. Louis in 1855 meant that the company could transport goods to both St. Louis and Chicago in less than twenty-four hours, creating a boom in the market for the next fifteen years.

William's sons, Clarence, Edgar, and William Pharr, succeeded him in 1880. In 1889, the trio officially incorporated the nurseries using the name Stark Bro's. Clarence, who was eventually president of the company, had less of a green thumb but more of a knack for marketing. He began advertising and distributed the company's first catalog in 1894. He created

Left: Paul Stark Jr. is a fifth generation Stark. Above: The Stark family tree shows two hundred years of ancestry.

the company's first logo, a silhouette of a bear and the phrase, "Stark Trees Bear Fruit," an emblem that remains painted on the side of a barn on the Stark Bro's property today. He also hosted the 1893 International New Fruit Fair, which is where things get interesting.

### THE DELICIOUS DUO

"In the 1800s, apples were what bananas are today—no variety," says Ken Lane, Stark Bro's Chief Marketing Officer.

In pursuit of a new variety to replace the cold, hardy, but unappetizing Ben Davis apple, Clarence Stark invited apple growers near and far to submit their creations for consideration for Best New Apple Variety.



Meanwhile, Iowa farmer Jesse Hiatt was fighting a chance seedling—a new variety that sprouts from unintentional breeding—on his property. Despite chopping it down twice, it bloomed and eventually grew a fruit that looked like an apple, but not exactly. It was red, bumpy on the bottom with stripes of yellow and a narrow base. Imagine a funhouse mirror version of the typical apple.

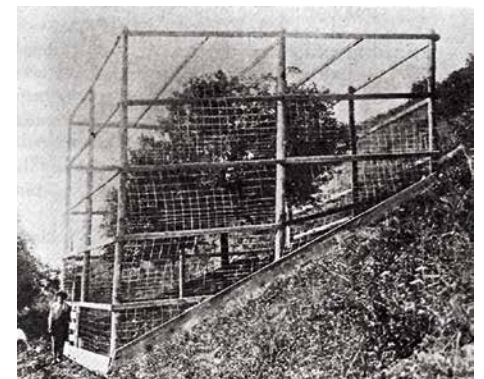
Hiatt knew it looked strange, but it was undeniably tasty. He submitted the fruit to the fair and eagerly awaited a response. Unfortunately, his tasty apples, which Hiatt called "Hawkeye," did win, but the samples had lost their name tag in transit. No one at the fair knew where this mystery fruit came from.

Persistence ruled the day, and Hiatt submitted the Hawkeye again in 1894. This time, the affixed name tag stayed put, and Clarence Stark and his brothers immediately rushed to Hiatt's Iowa farm to buy the rights to the bizarre apple and build a fence around the "Mother of Millions," as the original tree is referred to today. They named the

variety simply "Delicious." The company has since sold tens of millions of these trees.

Until fall 1914, the Delicious apple didn't have to share its name with another pomaceous fruit. However, Anderson Mullins of Odessa, West Virginia, changed that when he discovered a tree on his farm dripping with golden fruit. He sent a sample to the Stark compound, where Clarence's sons Paul Sr. and Lloyd tasted it. The apple variety was mellow and sweet, with a crisp skin. They had to have it.

Paul Sr. made his way to West Virginia, and paid \$5,000 for the rights and the land around the tree. He then promptly constructed a woven-steel cage, complete with burglar alarm, around the precious tree. Anderson Mullins's nephew sent Stark Bro's scions to clone the tree for the next thirty years. They named it "Golden Delicious" and rebranded the other "Red Delicious." The yellow variety is one of the best-selling apples of all time, and today, sixty percent of all apples found in grocery stores are descendants of the Delicious duo.



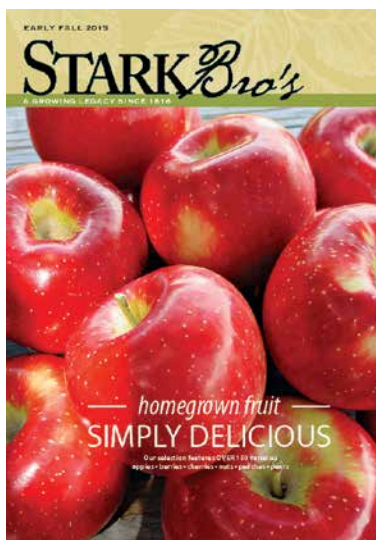
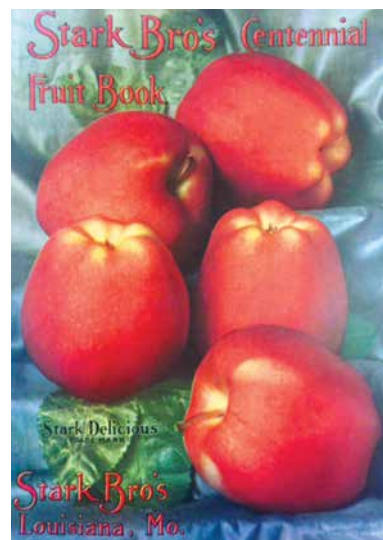
Top: Workers fill barrels with apples at Stark Bro's Nursery during the 1905 growing season. Bottom: The original Golden Delicious tree was fenced off in 1914.

### WIZARD OF HORTICULTURE

Around the time of the first Delicious discovery, horticultural wizard Luther Burbank entered into the Stark Bro's fold. Burbank is responsible for creating more than eight hundred strains and varieties of plants; the Russet Burbank potato may ring a bell. Clarence Stark, seeing a genius where critics saw a



Right: The Stark Bro's logo is iconic. Below: Left to right, the Stark Bro's 1916 catalogue celebrates the company's centennial. The 2015 catalogue still sports red apples. Stark Bro's executives pose in 1950.



madman, invited Burbank to work alongside his company and continue innovating. Prior to joining forces, Burbank was attempting to run his own seed and nursery shop to finance his research and living costs. Clarence saw this pitiful enterprise as a waste of time. “To demonstrate our sincere belief in your work, our company will give you \$9,000 if you will let me pick three of these new fruits you have shown me,” he said to Burbank. It is because of this agreement that Burbank was able to create the Shasta daisy, July Elberta peach, spineless cactus, and Santa Rosa plum.

On his deathbed in 1926, Burbank declared Stark Bro's the only ones worthy of continuing his work, and his wife sold all of Burbank's ongoing research and plants to the Starks.

This innovative spirit extended beyond the nursery and into the law books in the early 1900s. Now the primary owners of Burbank's great inventions and discoveries, the Starks intended to protect them. They, along with the rest of the agriculture industry, felt they deserved the same legal protections as inventors and songwriters. Burbank had written to

Paul Stark, Clarence's youngest son, on the sore subject prior to his death. So Paul formed a committee and headed to Washington to champion the Plant Patent Act, which allowed fruit developers to patent their creations for seventeen years. Thomas Edison sent a telegram to Congress on the bill's behalf, stating “This [bill] will, I feel sure, give us many Burbanks.” It became law in 1930.

“Paul Stark did a great job getting people to understand that you need to protect these discoveries, otherwise people can just take a scion, just like James Hart Stark did at the beginning, and start their own,” LeAnn says. “It's like pirating CDs. Paul Stark saw the unfairness in that.”

Stark Bro's received the first patent in 1932 for the Stark ®Hal-Berta Giant Peach™.

#### HOW DO YOU LIKE THEM APPLES?

The Stark legacy is overrun with superlatives and accolades. It is one of the oldest continuously running companies in America, alongside Remington firearms and Jim Beam whiskey. It is the world's oldest continuously operating nursery. It is the world's largest on-

line direct-to-consumer seller of fruit trees, nut trees, and berry plants. It is responsible for the creation of more than three hundred varieties of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and flowers. And while its beginnings could be attributed to marketing and invention, Stark Bro's ever-rising star is powered by “the other Starks,” the diehard-loyal employees.

There are more than a few “other Starks” that have stayed over thirty, forty, and even fifty years at the company. A list of nearly 150 employees who have worked thirty years or more for the nursery is included in the back of LeAnn's book.

“There are people in this company who have come to work every day longer than a lot of my staff have been alive,” says Ken Lane, chief marketing officer at Stark Bro's. “It's like looking at the ocean or standing alongside a redwood and looking up. It's a humbling thing.”

LeAnn's book, a detailed chronicle of the Stark Bro's legacy, contains accounts from family members, the Missouri Historical Society, the Louisiana Area Historical Museum, and even the last two living Starks to run the

COURTESY OF STARK BRO'S NURSERIES & ORCHARDS CO.

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**TWO HUNDRED YEARS IN BUSINESS** is such an impressive feat that commemorating in more than one way is expected. Yes, Stark Bro's is having a bicentennial sale, but another way the nursery is celebrating the milestone is a new book of recipes. *Fabulous Fruits: Recipes for every season* is full of recipes that incorporate many varieties of the nursery's many fruits, from a fresh apple cake that will make the Golden Delicious shine to a peach French toast casserole that puts the Hal-Berta Giant Peach on display. The book is a collaboration between chef Karen Mitcham-Stoeckley and photographer Curt Dennison who teamed up before for the book *A Culinary Legacy from Escoffier to Today*. For more information, visit [StarkBros.com](http://StarkBros.com).

company, Clay Stark Logan and Walter Logan. But perhaps the most entertaining and telling anecdotes come from Elmer Kidd, who also serves as the poster child for Stark Bro's employee loyalty.

Now the company's chief production officer, Elmer started at Stark Bro's in the spring of 1965, when he was thirteen years old. For fifty cents an hour, he carried drinking water to the field workers and has barely left the property since. He grew up with many of the Starks, stayed with the nursery when catastrophes hit, such as the fire of '74, the freeze of '91, and the flood of '93. He now works in the fields with his son, Billy, his assistant.

Elmer says what differentiates his employer from the rest of the industry, as you could probably guess, is the customer service.

“We follow the ball over the fence,” Elmer says. “You buy a tree, and our relationship doesn't end there. Stark Bro's is with you after the sale is done.”

Stark employees were put to that test back in 2001 when the company declared bankruptcy. The bank required the company to hold on to a small staff to maintain the fields for a future buyer. With only a few jobs holding on, roughly 470 people were sent home. Five of Elmer's cohorts, nicknamed “The Budders,” refused to sit idly at home. If there were any chance of resurrecting Stark Bro's, they would need to return to the field and grow trees. So they did, for ten hours a day, six days a week, for free. This dedicated group is the reason Stark Bro's is still flowering today. In September 2001, Stark Bro's

was auctioned off to Cameron Brown and Tim Abair, the current owners.

In the spirit of new beginnings, Cameron and his son also started the company website, which began its e-commerce in 2003. It's comprehensive, to say the least. Think of ninety-seven varieties of apples, instructions on how to grow them, each strain's history, and a list of equipment and conditions required to grow them. Now, multiply that by 150 other varieties of fruits, nuts, ornamentals, berries, books, tools, and more.

#### A FRUITFUL FUTURE

Much of Stark Bro's success comes down to being in the right place at the right time.

Urbanization would make a regular farmer's toes curl, but Stark Bro's adapted: they invented spur-type semi-dwarf trees. At two-thirds the height of a standard tree and with branches that bear fruit along their entire length and not just the ends, they were more physically economical and required far less labor.

Currently, the company is riding the wave of the farm-to-table movement.

“People want to know where their food comes from,” Ken says. “It doesn't get much easier than that when it's in your backyard.”

The company is also finding its way into the homebrew beer craze. People come to the Stark Bro's Garden Center in Louisiana, Missouri, looking to buy fruit to make wine and hops to make beer. The product details on the Stark Bro's website are so specific that even the novice brewer can learn which plant will produce a good IPA, whether the plant will fare



Cameron Brown is one of the current owners of Stark Bro's Nursery. Cameron, along with co-owner Tim Abair, have helped the company thrive since they bought it in 2001.

well in the buyer's zip code, and even how the plant got its name.

Even the way they do their business is adapting to the future. Elmer now walks through the field with an iPad in hand to track the grafting and budding processes.

“We have to have our eyes open,” Ken says.

What's surprising to find in this day of instant gratification—the “McDonald's Age,” as Elmer refers to it—is that the pecan, which takes seventeen years to produce nuts, is Stark Bro's top-selling nut tree.

“There's an old expression,” Ken says. “The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second best time is today.”

Many of their customers purchase trees such as the pecan so that their children or grandchildren can enjoy it, a sentiment that echoes something James Hart Stark certainly cherished in 1816.