

HERITAGE FRUIT TREE PROJECT

Every Tree Has a Story

ARTICLE NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT | PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED

Last fall, when Jimmy Dula was on his way to Julie Grange's home near the Hotel Colorado, he began to get excited. Many trees in the neighborhood grew in straight rows, as if planted for a long-ago orchard. And here in the Roaring Fork Valley, pear trees are fairly rare.

"They were really old, nice trees, and the pears were delicious," says Dula, who serves as fundraising manager for the Heritage Fruit Tree Project. "We wondered if there was once an orchard there for the hotel kitchen, or what was the deal? No one knows."

Despite considerable digging, neither the Frontier Historical Society in Glenwood Springs nor the archive at the Hotel Colorado has produced a photo documenting an orchard. Tantalizing hints have surfaced: The family of the Walter Devereux, who developed the Hotel Colorado, owned a ranch that was located near the current Glenwood Springs Recreation Center and included a 350-acre pear orchard. Perhaps the pear trees near the hotel were also planted by the Devereux family?

As Dula says, no one knows.

Chasing down heritage fruit trees throughout the Roaring Fork Valley involves more than a few mysteries. Before California grew to dominate the national produce market, fresh fruit remained scarce and expensive for much of the year, so the valley's 19th century homesteaders grew apple, pear, apricot, plum and cherry trees around their homes. Many of those trees have survived for as long as 130 years. Many are still fruitful today.

Their fruit is often sweeter and juicier than fruit from contemporary nursery trees, and because local heritage trees have adapted to our climate, they harbor a priceless and tested reservoir of fruit genes. The U.S. Department of Agriculture rates the Roaring Fork Valley's climate as ranging from Zone 4A in Aspen (with winter temperatures as low as -30°F) to Zone 4B in Basalt (to -15°F in winter) and Zone 5B in Glenwood Springs (down to around -10°). Even in the warmest areas, that's more challenging than the climate enjoyed by commercial orchards near Delta and Paonia.

But the Roaring Fork's hearty, historic fruit trees are now disappearing or in jeopardy from development, old age or neglect.

The Heritage Fruit Tree Project began in 2009 when an avid locavore, Michael Thompson, the principal architect of Ecosystems Design, Inc., combined forces with Jerome Osentowski, founder of the Central Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute, a nonprofit, sustainable agricultural education center located in Basalt. The two were soon joined by Lisa DiNardo, a certified arborist and the former horticulturist for the Town of Basalt, and Jimmy Dula, who runs Colorado Soil Systems, a landscape management company based in Aspen.

An effort seeded by love and volunteer efforts, the Heritage Fruit Tree Project aims to map all of Roaring Fork Valley's old fruit trees. Volunteers identify trees with tasty fruit and favorable characteristics; they then graft new stock from those trees. The tree-hugging project has already made fruit available for "gleaning" and this fall, the project will be partnering with LIFT-UP and the Garfield County Live Well program to feed the needy.

The Heritage Fruit Tree Project recently got a major assistance from the Kay Brunnier Tree Fund. Kay Brunnier, a Carbondale resident, provided a \$10,000 grant through the Carbondale Tree Board. The grant supports both a matching-grant program designed to encourage the planting of trees and the valley-wide effort to survey fruit trees.

The project has already mapped 72 heritage trees in its database, and it is using an Arc GIS system, a mapping tool often employed by cities and towns, to locate trees in Carbondale and Missouri Heights. "Carbondale is a great chunk of land to bite off," says Dula. "We've been getting tips from people all over, and we have a long list of site visits to do. We're still





working out how much information we need to collect, and we are trying to figure out if there's a crowd-sourced way to collect information."

The project collects digital photos of cataloged trees at three different times of year: while barren in winter, while blossoming in spring, and when bearing summer fruit. It also rehabilitates and propagates heritage trees. Osentowski has taken cuttings from many of the oldest trees and grafted them onto strong root stocks at the Central Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute.

While working to identify and document the trees, the project is also unearthing and preserving local history. Thompson and Osentowski tell of one of the area's pioneers, Christine Lucksinger, who brought a grafted apple tree with her when she embarked on a new life in Colorado. That 120 year-year old tree is still bearing fruit by the shores of Lake Christine, on property once owned by Lucksinger's family.

Recently, Jimmy Dula trekked up Cattle Creek to survey several trees growing on an old homestead there. "The drainage ditch there has kept two of the three old apple trees alive," he says.

Heritage Fruit Tree Project co-founder Michael Thompson tracked the history of those remaining two Cattle Creek apple trees. He found that they had been planted by Matilda Alden and Horace Haff, a couple who had purchased land along Fisher Creek from the original settlers, the Fisher family.

Horace Haff, a scout and "Indian tracker" had lived on the Front Range and was said to have been involved in the Sand Creek Massacre. Horace had been raised by the Fisher family and he moved to the Western Slope with them. Horace and several of his descendents are buried in a nearly-forgotten graveyard near the homestead while other descendents still live in the valley and are scattered throughout Colorado.

In 2008, Thompson visited Rose Zella Haff, who in 1943 had married the original homesteaders' son, Glen Alden Haff, in a ceremony in Leadville. Glen is buried on the property, but Rose Zella was living in a local nursing home at the time.

Thompson wrote, "A couple of days before my visit, I thought to search my freezer to see if I had any more of the apple pie filling I had put away in the autumn of 2007, some of it from the Fisher Creek apples. I found one bag of pie filling marked "Fisher Creek Apples", so I baked Rose Zella a pie... from the trees on the land she and her husband Glenn Haff had sold back to the BLM many years before."

The next year, Rose Zella Haff, who had been born in 1920 in El Jebel, passed away at the age of 89 at Grace Healthcare.

The Heritage Fruit Tree project is working to preserve the fruitful legacy of the valley's first settlers before it fades away forever. Among the project's goals are establishing a permanent research and demonstration park with examples of every identified variety of fruit tree, so that their continued propagation can be ensured. The project aims to include at least 50 varieties of apple, apricot, pear, peach, plum and cherry trees.

Roaring Fork Valley residents who want to share their knowledge of heritage trees and learn more about the project should visit HeritageFruitGuild.com or email heritagefruit@gmail.com.