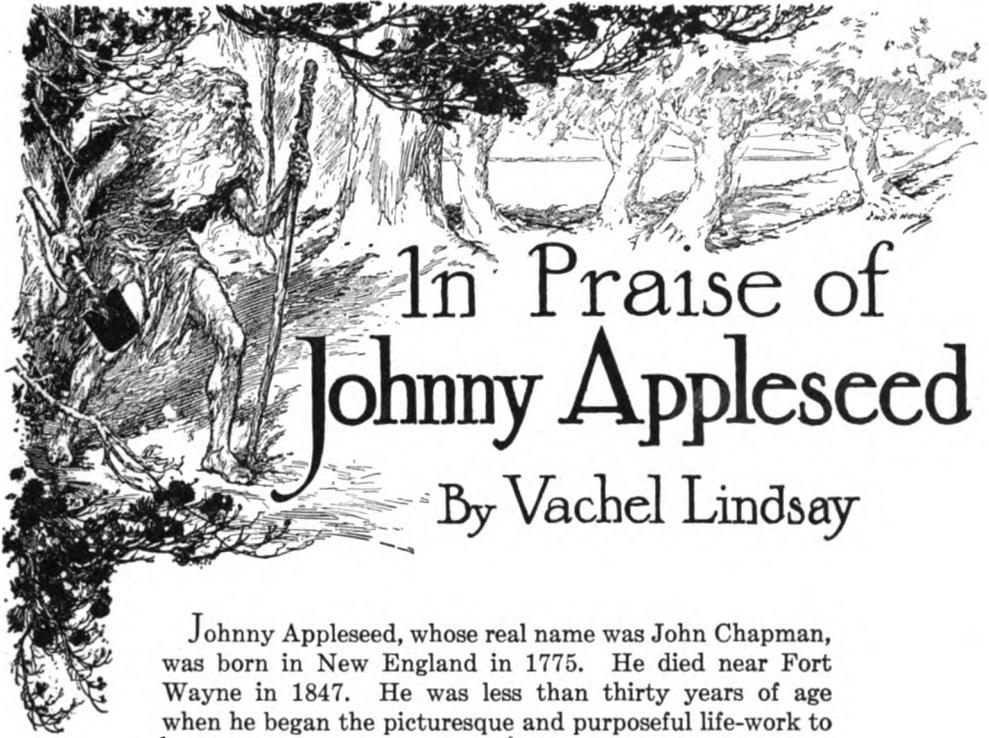




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In Praise of Johnny Appleseed

By Vachel Lindsay

Johnny Appleseed, whose real name was John Chapman, was born in New England in 1775. He died near Fort Wayne in 1847. He was less than thirty years of age when he began the picturesque and purposeful life-work to which Mr. Lindsay pays vivid tribute in the following pages. In 1803, or perhaps a bit earlier, young Chapman moved westward to the neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There he began to work out the settled purpose of his life, which was to move westward, keeping always a little in advance of the peopled frontier, planting orchards as he went. As civilization periodically caught up with him, he disposed of his trees for a "fip-penny bit" apiece, for food or old clothes, or, more frequently, gave them away.

For forty-six years he walked barefoot and unarmed through the wilderness. He was often clothed only in an old coffee-sack, with holes for his head and arms, and carried a tin pan, which often served as his hat. The Indians regarded him as a great "medicine-man," doubtless because he scattered through the woods the seeds of medicinal plants, such as catnip and pennyroyal. He was a lover of children and animals. He was never molested by the Indians or by the beasts. He was welcomed everywhere. He lived to see his trees bearing fruit over a territory of a hundred thousand acres.

He was a sort of secular medicant friar. An incidental part of his mission was to spread the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg. In the following poem Mr. Lindsay pays homage to a character that has been too often treated as eccentric only.—THE EDITOR.



In Praise of Johnny Appleseed

Born 1775 • Died 1847

By VACHEL LINDSAY



I. OVER THE APPALACHIAN BARRICADE

In the days of President Washington,
The glory of the nations,
Dust and ashes,
Snow and sleet,
And hay and oats and wheat,
Blew west,
Crossed the Appalachians,
Found the glades of rotting leaves, the soft deer-pastures,
The farms of the far-off future
In the forest.
Colts jumped the fence,
Snorting, ramping, snapping, sniffing,
With gastronomic calculations,
Crossed the Appalachians,
The east walls of our citadel,
And turned to gold-horned unicorns,
Feasting in the dim, volunteer farms of the forest.
Stripedest, kickingest kittens escaped,
Caterwauling "Yankee Doodle Dandy,"
Renounced their poor relations,
Crossed the Appalachians,
And turned to tiny tigers
In the humorous forest.
Chickens escaped
From farmyard congregations,
Crossed the Appalachians,
And turned to amber trumpets
On the ramparts of our Hoosiers' nest and citadel,
Millennial heralds
Of the mazy forest.
Pigs broke loose, scrambled west,
Scorned their loathsome stations,
Crossed the Appalachians,
Turned to roaming, foaming wild boars



Of the forest.

The smallest, blindest puppies toddled west
While their eyes were coming open,
And, with misty observations,
Crossed the Appalachians,
Barked, barked, barked
At the glow-worms and the marsh lights and the lightning-bugs,
And turned to ravening wolves

Of the forest.

Crazy parrots and canaries flew west,
Drunk on May-time revelations,
Crossed the Appalachians,
And turned to delirious, flower-dressed fairies

Of the lazy forest.

Haughtiest swans and peacocks swept west,
And, despite soft derivations,
Crossed the Appalachians,
And turned to blazing warrior souls

Of the forest,

Singing the ways
Of the Ancient of Days,
And the "Old Continentals
In their ragged regimentals,"
With bard's imaginations,
Crossed the Appalachians.

And

A boy
Blew west,
And with prayers and incantations,
And with "Yankee Doodle Dandy,"
Crossed the Appalachians,
And was "young John Chapman,"

Then

"Johnny Appleseed, Johnny Appleseed,"
Chief of the fastnesses, dappled and vast,
In a pack on his back,
In a deer-hide sack,
The beautiful orchards of the past,
The ghosts of all the forests and the groves—
In that pack on his back,
In that talisman sack,
To-morrow's peaches, pears, and cherries,
To-morrow's grapes and red raspberries,
Seeds and tree souls, precious things,
Feathered with microscopic wings,



All the outdoors the child heart knows,
And the apple, green, red, and white,
Sun of his day and his night—
The apple allied to the thorn,
Child of the rose.
Porches untrod of forest houses
All before him, all day long,
“Yankee Doodle” his marching song;
And the evening breeze
Joined his psalms of praise
As he sang the ways
Of the Ancient of Days.

Leaving behind august Virginia,
Proud Massachusetts, and proud Maine,
Planting the trees that would march and train
On, in his name to the great Pacific,
Like Birnam wood to Dunsinane,
Johnny Appleseed swept on,
Every shackle gone,
Loving every sloshy brake,
Loving every skunk and snake,
Loving every leathery weed,
Johnny Appleseed, Johnny Appleseed,
Master and ruler of the unicorn-ramping forest,
The tiger-mewing forest,
The rooster-trumpeting, boar-foaming, wolf-ravening forest,
The spirit-haunted, fairy-enchanted forest,
Stupendous and endless,
Searching its perilous ways
In the name of the Ancient of Days.



II. THE INDIANS WORSHIP HIM, BUT HE HURRIES ON

Painted kings in the midst of the clearings
Heard him asking his friends the eagles
To guard each planted seed and seedling.
Then he was a god, to the red man's dreaming;
Then the chiefs brought treasures grotesque and fair,—
Magical trinkets and pipes and guns,



Beads and furs from their medicine-lair,—
Stuck holy feathers in his hair,
Hailed him with austere delight.
The orchard god was their guest through the night.

While the late snow blew from bleak Lake Erie,
Scourging rock and river and reed,
All night long they made great medicine
For Jonathan Chapman,
Johnny Appleseed,
Johnny Appleseed;
And as though his heart were a wind-blown wheat-sheaf,
As though his heart were a new-built nest,
As though their heaven house were his breast,
In swept the snow-birds singing glory.
And I hear his bird heart beat its story,
Hear yet how the ghost of the forest shivers,
Hear yet the cry of the gray, old orchards,
Dim and decaying by the rivers,
And the timid wings of the bird-ghosts beating,
And the ghosts of the tom-toms beating, beating.

But he left their wigwams and their love.
By the hour of dawn he was proud and stark,
Kissed the Indian babes with a sigh,
Went forth to live on roots and bark,
Sleep in the trees, while the years howled by.
Calling the catamounts by name,
And buffalo bulls no hand could tame,
Slaying never a living creature,
Joining the birds in every game,
With the gorgeous turkey gobblers mocking,
With the lean-necked eagles boxing and shouting;
Sticking their feathers in his hair,—
Turkey feathers,
Eagle feathers,—
Trading hearts with the whole young earth,
Swept on winged and wonder-crested,
Bare-armed, barefooted, and bare-breasted.

The maples, shedding their spinning seeds,
Called to his appleseeds in the ground,
Vast chestnut-trees, with their butterfly nations,
Called to his seeds without a sound.
And the chipmunk turned a somersault,
And the foxes danced the Virginia reel;



Hawthorne and crab-thorn bent, rain-wet,
And dropped their flowers in his night-black hair;
And the soft fawns stopped for his perorations;
And his black eyes shone through the forest-gleam,
And he plunged young hands into new-turned earth,
And prayed dear orchard boughs into birth;
And he ran with the rabbit and slept with the stream.
And so for us he made great medicine,
And so for us he made great medicine,
In the days of President Washington.



III. JOHNNY APPLESEED'S OLD AGE

Long, long after,
When settlers put up beam and rafter,
They asked of the birds: "Who gave this fruit?
Who watched this fence till the seeds took root?
Who gave these boughs?" They asked the sky,
And there was no reply.
But the robin might have said,
"To the farthest West he has followed the sun,
His life and his empire just begun."

Self-scourged, like a monk, with a throne for wages,
Stripped like the iron-souled Hindu sages,
Draped like a statue, in strings like a scarecrow,
His helmet-hat an old tin pan,
But worn in the love of the heart of man,
More sane than the helm of Tamerlane,
Hairy Ainu, wild man of Borneo, Robinson Crusoe—Johnny Appleseed;
And the robin might have said,
"Sowing, he goes to the far, new West,
With the apple, the sun of his burning breast—
The apple allied to the thorn,
Child of the rose."

Washington buried in Virginia,
Jackson buried in Tennessee,
Young Lincoln, dreaming in Illinois,
And Johnny Appleseed, priestly and free,
Knotted and gnarled, past seventy years,



Still planted on in the woods alone.
Ohio and young Indiana—
These were his wide altar-stone,
Where still he burnt out flesh and bone.

Twenty days ahead of the Indian, twenty years ahead of the white
man,
At last the Indian overtook him, at last the Indian hurried past him;
At last the white man overtook him, at last the white man hurried
past him;
At last his own trees overtook him, at last his own trees hurried past
him.
Many cats were tame again,
Many ponies tame again,
Many pigs were tame again,
Many canaries tame again;
And the real frontier was his sun-burnt breast.

From the fiery core of that apple, the earth,
Sprang apple-amaranths divine.
Love's orchards climbed to the heavens of the West,
And snowed the earthly sod with flowers.
Farm hands from the terraces of the blest
Danced on the mists with their ladies fine;
And Johnny Appleseed laughed with his dreams,
And swam once more the ice-cold streams.
And the doves of the spirit swept through the hours,
With doom-calls, love-calls, death-calls, dream-calls;
And Johnny Appleseed, all the year,
Lifted his hands to the farm-filled sky,
To the apple-harvesters busy on high;
And so once more his youth began,
And so for us he made great medicine—
Johnny Appleseed, medicine-man.

Then
The sun was their turned-up barrel,
Out of which their apples rolled,
Down the repeated terraces,
Thumping across the gold,
A presence in each apple that touched the forest mold,
A ballot-box in each apple,
A state capital in each apple,
Great high schools, great colleges,
All America in each apple,



Each red, rich, round, and bouncing moon
That touched the forest mold.
Like scrolls and rolled-up flags of silk,
He saw the fruits unfold,
All color and all glory in one wild-flower-tangled dream,
Confusion and death sweetness, and a thicket of crab-thorns,
Heart of a hundred midnights, heart of thousand morns,
Heaven's boughs bent down with their alchemy,
Perfumed airs, and thoughts of wonder.
And the dew on the grass and his own cold tears
Were one in brooding mystery,
Though death's loud thunder came upon him,
Though death's loud thunder struck him down;
The boughs and the proud thoughts swept through the thunder,
Till he saw the wide nation, each State a flower,
Each petal a park for holy feet,
With wild fawns merry on every street,
The vista of a thousand years, flower-lighted and complete.

Hear the lazy weeds murmuring, bays and rivers whispering,
From Michigan to Texas, California to Maine;
Listen to the eagles, screaming, calling,
"Johnny Appleseed, Johnny Appleseed,"
There by the doors of old Fort Wayne.

In the four-poster bed Johnny Appleseed built,
Autumn rains were the curtains, autumn leaves were the quilt.
He laid him down sweetly, and slept through the night,
Like a bump on a log, like a stone washed white,
There by the doors of old Fort Wayne.

