Only one orchard survives within city

By Eric Beidel
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Winchester — For more than a century, apples have been stored here, processed here, and shipped to places far and wide.

But the region’s apple industry — and especially within the city limits — is a ghost of its former self.

Storage facilities have sat vacant and then been sold to developers.

Visitors will likely spot a giant fake apple before glimpsing a real apple tree.

The city’s biggest celebration gets its name from the apple, but the Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival has little to do with apples any more.

Somewhere along the way, orchard land became worth more in sale than in harvest.

Orchards gave way to neighborhoods and shopping centers and city streets.

All except one orchard, that is.

“We’re still here”

In Winchester’s northwest corner, surrounded by houses, remains the last example of the city’s agricultural past.

The orchard covers about 16 acres off Margaret Drive. The trees form rows on a hill just above the houses on Fox Drive.

Coming out of winter, the bare trees barely hide the subdivision, school, or the expanding Winchester Medical Center just down the hill from the orchard.

Standing at the highest point of the orchard, a visitor hears few sounds — mostly chirping birds and the hum of cars on U.S. 522 and Va. 37.

The orchard is owned by the Solenberger family, which operates Fruit Hill Orchards, a collection of growing sites surrounding Winchester.
Along with the large warehouses that once stored apples and the giant apple statues that decorate city streets, the Margaret Drive orchard is a small reminder that the apple business once ruled Winchester, guiding its economy and writing its history.

A migrant workers’ camp in the city fills up during the apple harvest each year, but the workers leave each morning to pick the crop in the surrounding counties.

A handful stay put to pick apples at Fruit Hill’s city orchard, which typically has about a dozen employees but swells to more than 200 during the picking season.

“We’re a dwindling population,” said Diane Kearns, treasurer for Fruit Hill Orchards. “Fewer and fewer people are doing this. But we’re still here.”

### The rise of apples

Between the American Revolution and the Civil War, Winchester grew quickly and became a hub for markets and fairs.

The market was biggest for wheat, hide, fur, tobacco, and hemp.

The Civil War tore apart most local economies, including Winchester’s. But the city rebuilt itself in the years following the war as a manufacturing and commercial center.

Glove and furniture factories mixed with leather tanneries and a shoe factory. But the glove industry was by far the biggest employer.

In 1871, the first commercial apple orchard was planted in the area.
John S. Lupton started with 50 acres and his orchard grew until it covered 4,000 acres, according to Frederic Morton’s 1925 book “The Story of Winchester in Virginia.”

At the time of the book’s publication, the Shenandoah Valley had 355 commercial orchards containing almost 700,000 trees and bringing in almost $7 million each year, Morton wrote.

Most of the orchards were outside the city limits to the west, where the soil is more conducive to planting trees.

Inside the city, though, were storage facilities such as Winchester Cold Storage and processing plants such as National Fruit Product Co., both of which are still in business.

“We need National Fruit”

National Fruit processes apples into White House applesauce, juice, cider, vinegar, butter, pie fillings, and sliced apples.

Winchester Cold Storage does little with apples these days — about a quarter of its operations involve fruit. It specializes in storing a wide variety of items — from food to machine parts — in atmospheres that range from freezing to refrigerated to room temperature.

Established in 1917, the storage facility had the capacity to store 1.3 million bushels of apples by 1929. It was once recognized as the largest apple storage facility in the world.

Apples stored there wound up in many places. During the Depression, especially, most of the apples were loaded on ships and carried overseas.

It took about 150 people to unload, store, and ship the apples then. Technological advances mean that the same tasks now can be carried out by 25 people, according to Winchester Cold Storage’s Web site.

The apples in Fruit Hill’s Winchester orchard end up in National Fruit’s facilities on Fairmont Avenue.

National Fruit once had operations across the country, even in Colorado and Michigan.

The company in recent years has eliminated its growing operations. It now has a bottling location in North Carolina and the processing facilities in Winchester.

“We need National Fruit,” Kearns said. “We can’t survive without them.”

“All over the place”

When he arrived in 1978, Gary DeOms recalled, he noted that a couple of orchards were left in the city limits — Fruit Hill’s site and a small one near the Kmart store on Pleasant Valley Road.

“By 1978, we already had seen the end of it in the city,” said DeOms, now retired from the Virginia Extension Service.

The Pleasant Valley Road orchard was more like a personal orchard. But it too is gone and the land has been proposed for development as a shopping center.

Robert Solenberger, whose family owns and runs Fruit Hill Orchards, remembers many orchards within the city limits — at Millwood Crossing, along Whittier Avenue, Meadow Branch Avenue, Merrimans Lane, to name a
few. “They were all over the place.”

Most were personal orchards and not kept up for large commercial purposes. And most sites that could claim to be true city growing operations were on land annexed from Frederick County.

An orchard stood where Daniel Morgan Middle School is today, at Purcell Avenue and Cork Street. Local residents remember that some apple trees had to be ripped out of the ground to make room for the school, which was built in 1974.

But the apple industry has fallen victim to global competition, much like the country’s auto industry.

Now, China is the world’s leading producer of apples.

Even the Old Time Apple Growers Association, a group of local individuals interested in the history of the area apple industry, has seen its membership decline over the years. And none of the association’s members reside in the city limits, said the group’s treasurer Bill Huhlen.

“[Winchester] was the epicenter of it all,” he said. “The infrastructure was all here.”

Not only did companies in the city store and process the apples, but they also provided chemicals to growing operations throughout the Valley.

But National Fruit and Winchester Cold Storage have scaled back their efforts, and the ZeroPak building on Cameron Street, formerly an apple and fruit processing plant, now houses a brewery.

“I think it’s just per chance that we’re the last orchard in the city of Winchester,” Kearns said. “This business just doesn’t pay the bills any more. These days, you have to do something else.”

In many cases, that means selling an orchard to developers.

At Fruit Hill, it meant growing other crops and scrambling to find ways to stay in the apple business.

Growing in the city

Fruit Hill’s Winchester orchard was planted in Frederick County in the early 1970s.

It also had peach and cherry trees at one time.

The orchard land became part of the city through annexation more than 30 years ago.

Part of the reason most of the apples were grown outside the city limits is common sense — in the city, land areas are compact and full of concrete.

Also, the soil east of Va. 37 does not have the higher quality orchards need, growers say.

The “good stuff” for growing runs in a band north and south and to the west of Winchester, Kearns said.

Fruit Hill’s Winchester orchard was once part of orchards just west of the city line. But then Va. 37 was built, dividing the property.

The family was compensated in court at the time, but can no longer drive its equipment back and forth on
orchard land. Employees must leave one orchard and travel on roadways taking them to another orchard.

The city orchard “used to be contiguous with others west of 37,” Kearns said. “Then the road came through and split things up. That’s the real reason we keep it as an orchard.”

“We'll hang on”

Fruit Hill Orchards made a profit on its fruit for the first time in a long time last year.

Much of it had to do with the company’s 3,000 or so acres outside Winchester. Fruit Hill operates orchards from West Virginia to Strasburg.

But the 16-acre site in the city limits produced 7,050 bushels of Golden Delicious apples last year — a “not very good” harvest for an orchard with more than 2,000 trees, said Kearns, the daughter of Robert Solenberger.

Conventional wisdom says the orchard should produce about 11,000 bushels, or 700 bushels for each acre.

The company has done a few things differently over the years to survive.

Fruit Hill now has some “row cropping” on about 700 acres of its expansive land. Employees removed old apple trees and instead of replacing them, grew corn and beans.

As for the apples, the company has concentrated on “quantity over quality.”

Because Fruit Hill Orchards grows apples for processing, the fruit does not need to be as aesthetically pleasing as apples that go straight to the produce section of a grocery store.

“By concentrating on size and quantity, we’ve been able to keep our costs down,” Kearns said.

Barring a catastrophe, “we’ll be in the apple business until the bitter end.”

Fruit Hill averages about $3 million in sales each year.

Occasionally, the family receives a letter from someone interested in buying the 16 acres in the corner of the city. But the answer has always been “no,” Kearns said.

“We'll hang on as long as we can, I guess until it’s not making sense any more.”

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