

John W. Hershey, His Life, His Work

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"The tree of the field is man's life", Deuteronomy 20: 19. This verse was the motto that made John Hershey. He knew the importance of trees in the scheme of the universe—fruit for food, the power to hold water in the soil, stopping erosion, for shade, and of course, *Beauty*.

John loved God, was companion of the trees and husbandman of the soil.

About 1921, he started a nut tree nursery on a small 8 acre plot at the east end of Downingtown, Pa., after he had worked for and studied with one of the greatest tree men, the late Mr. J. F. Jones. John loved him like a father and so often went back to him for advice and help. Our beloved, late Dr. J. Russell Smith, was another advisor. John called him his godfather.

The nursery started on a shoestring. John worked at it during the nursery season and in the winter did tree surgery. Help was hard to get and all the youngsters in the neighborhood were hired. Also, those further away were transported by car and returned home in the evening. He worked on this basis for 20 years, using transient help mostly, except for Mr. John B. Pannebaker, who started in the nursery when he was about 10 years old and stayed about 18 years. He learned to graft and propagate and to superintend the nursery when John was not there.

In 1932 or '33, President Roosevelt created the Tennessee Valley Authority. As its chairman was Dr. Arthur E. Morgan. Dr. Morgan, who was interested in Tree Crops, interviewed Dr. J. Russell Smith (who was father of *Tree Crops*) and asked him to find a man to head up the tree crop work in the T.V.A. Dr. Smith recommended John. John accepted, and in April of 1934, leaving the nursery in Downingtown in John Pannebaker's hands, left for Tennessee.

He was associated with the Forestry Division, often working under difficulties because he was not a degreed forester. During this time, he had the opportunity to work with Dr. Ernest J. Schreiner, one of the world's best tree breeders and geneticists, and with J. C. McDaniel, who knew trees and plants so well. Both were full fledged foresters.

The Tree Crop Nursery was started from scratch, not too far below the Norris Dam in Tennessee. The ground was plowed, seed planted, seedlings planted, and grafting and tree breeding done as time went on. Mr. Harry Stewart who was associated with Mr. J. F. Jones before this, was the chief nut tree grafter. Mr. Earl Sharpe was nursery superintendent, supervising a crew of CCC boys in the planting of seed trees, gathering nuts from good trees in the Valley and all the jobs connected with the nursery program. With this and with Drs. Schreiner and McDaniel, the best men there were, the nursery flourished. In a few short years, select seedlings and grafted trees were plantd on

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the hills of the Valley. Excellent nuts and fruits were found there and propagated in the nursery and later were distributed to farms.

During this time, John Hershey was told he had cancer. In 1936 he spent 11 weeks in Philadelphia in the hospital. Needless to say, he worked under a physical handicap for a while, always dreaming of the Valley full of good trees, helping to hold the soil and stop erosion, which was so prevalent at that time.

John was with the T.V.A. until 1938, acting as a consultant for just a little while into 1939. Back to Downingtown, ever so grateful for the experience with the T.V.A. and its associates, he was more enthused than ever.

For several years, John fought a metastatic cancer having Xray treatments on and off for several years.

In 1945 the Nut Tree Nursery was moved 4 miles north of Downingtown, to a farm. Eight acres were used for the nursery. Always wanting to practice what he preached, John laid out 40 acres into plots to plant trees in orchard form. Planted were black walnut, English walnut, pecan, hickory, hicans, chestnut and filbert, hazel, persimmons (American and Oriental), honey locust and mulberry. Other trees and plants for bird food were added. The balance of the farm were seeded to corn, barley, wheat, hay and pasture.

In 1958 John spent 6 weeks in the hospital. Most of his stomach was removed. It was several years before he fully recuperated from that. He always kept on with his program, sometimes directing it from the back seat of the car.

Thanks to Kitty Murphy, our daughter, who could so capably superintend the nursery, graft and do so many things and her husband Sam and other loyal folks, the program moved on.

Later the animals foraged on the crops from the trees—horses and cows on honey locust, all the animals on the persimmons. Pigs loved mulberries as did the fowl. Steers ate acorns. Chestnuts disappeared rapidly when the animals learned to eat them, especially cows and steers.

In 1963, Christmas week, the barn burned down. All but 8 steers and a few chickens were lost. Another barn was built, restocked and within a year, the place was back to a balanced farm program.

The nursery was kept going but each year it was harder to get help. Finally in 1965, John decided to slowly close out the nursery and concentrate on the Tree Crop farm, hoping someday to turn it over into a perpetuated arboretum. This almost materialized. However, because of lack of funds and other programs in the Brandywine Valley area of which the farm was part, the board did not go through with it. To John Hershey, who never, never lost his enthusiasm, this was a blow. However, as usual, he popped right back making plans to keep the place going.

John began to lose ground physically about 1965. The next year he was not able to get over his beloved fertile acres quite as often. Never losing his enthusiasm, always so grateful for each day, he enjoyed the place from where he could see it. It was virtually a "Garden of Eden". His efforts really showed—producing.

July 1967, he spent a few days in the hospital, hoping that transfusions, etc. would give him strength, but he never gained ground after that. Each day getting weaker, not suffering any pain until September 7, 1967, he slipped away.

John Hershey was the most courageous man I ever knew. The most fitting memorial to John are the trees growing and bearing throughout the land that he stimulated folks into planting.

The Tree Crop Farm had to be sold. The Nursery closed down. Dreams sometimes end like this.

More about John Hershey's work can be found in a chapter of the last "Tree Crops" by Dr. J. Russell Smith and a small book that John wrote called "Nature's Orbits".