

Peter M. Gideon—Pioneer Nut Grower

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MENTION of the name of Peter M. Gideon in Minnesota usually recalls his interest in growing seedling fruits and his introduction of the Wealthy apple and other less well known varieties. That he also was interested in growing nut trees seems to have escaped mention. A search through reports of the Minnesota Horticultural Society published in Gideon's time and later, failed to reveal any comments or reports by Gideon or any reference to his work with nut trees. Within the last few years, however, an interesting story has been gradually unfolding to show that Gideon was one of the pioneers in the introduction and cultivation of nut trees in Minnesota.

The First Clue

In the spring of 1937 a visitor at the Fruit Breeding Farm mentioned having seen hickory trees growing somewhere along the road to the "Narrows" at Lake Minnetonka. The trees were said to be growing "Near a garage with a red roof" but a search failed to locate them. A few years later the same visitor promised to furnish a sketch of the location, but this was not sent, and later searches along the highway were fruitless. It had been known for some time that a row of old butternut trees was growing along a lake-shore drive on the old Gideon homestead but it was not realized that the hickory trees might also be growing in the same locality.

Another clue to the location of the long sought hickory trees was obtained in February 1944 through a telephone inquiry concerning the growing of hickory seedlings from nuts that had been collected along the "Narrows" road the previous fall. It was too late at that time of year for the dried nuts to be of value for planting but the caller gave good directions for locating the site. In the spring of 1944 the trees were readily located close to the highway at Manitou on the old Gideon homestead. There were twelve large trees and four smaller ones growing around cottages on the site. The older trees were in broken rows giving the impression they might have been planted originally in uniform rows. Some of the larger trees were 16 inches or more in trunk diameter and ranged up to at least 35 feet in height. All but two of the trees were representatives of the northern shagbark hickory, *Carya ovata*, native of Winona and Houston Counties but not commonly found elsewhere in the state. Under one tree, however, some

very large nuts were found. This tree 13 inches in trunk diameter and 35 feet high, has been identified as a specimen of *Carya laciniosa* variously known as the Shellbark, Southern Shagbark, or King Nut hickory. (See cover picture.) This tree, although growing far north of its native range, was a vigorous, healthy specimen and showed no evidence of winter injury. In the fall of 1945, another tree that did not bear in 1944 was found to be of the *laciniosa* species, and a third tree has been identified as a hybrid.

From inquiries at neighboring cottages it was learned that the trees had been bearing for many years. This information and the size of the trees indicated that they were not of recent planting. The writer grew up where hickory trees were common and knew the location of nearly every bearing tree for several miles around his old home. At that time little attention was given to trees of less than six inches in diameter as they were considered too young to bear. Based on this early experience the trees at Manitou were thought to be around 60 years old, an age that would date them back within Peter Gideon's active years, or to about 1880. This estimate was not shared by others in the party that located the trees but has been verified by evidence obtained later.

Age Established

Through a series of contacts with people who had lived in the cottages on the site, information as to the age and origin of the trees was at length obtained from Mr. C. LeRoy Kimports, now living in Georgia. He stated in a letter that when he purchased the cottage site in 1908 there was a "nicely laid out grove" that already was bearing nuts. He was told that the trees had been planted by Peter Gideon. When the cottages were built many of the trees were removed, but those that were left showed some of the original rows.

So the story had partially unfolded, but many missing items kept curiosity and interest active. Frequent inquiries finally led to a pleasant visit in the fall of 1944 at the home of Mr. E. W. Becker on the Minnetonka shore near the Gideon homestead. Although 86 years old, Mr. Becker readily recalled incidents and dates relating to the time when as a youth he worked for Peter Gideon. Many missing items furnished by Mr. Becker completed the story of the Gideon hickories.

Mr. Becker told how Gideon

brought the nuts back from a trip to his old home near Clinton, Illinois in the fall of 1878. The nuts were planted in the spring of 1879 in check rows "like corn in a field", where they grew to make a thick stand. The trees were too crowded for best development but Mr. Becker recalled that Gideon found some of them bearing nuts before he died in 1899. As the site was sold only a few years after the nuts were planted, and as Gideon became less active with increased age, Mr. Becker said that Gideon did not pay much attention to the trees after the site was sold. Possibly this explains the failure of Gideon to mention nut planting in his reports.

Further information obtained from Mr. Becker revealed more of Gideon's interest in nut growing. The row of butternuts along the lake shore drive and some black walnuts located not far distant on the west side of the "Narrows" road were planted by Gideon "At least as early as the seed that produced the Wealthy apple". So they probably were planted about 1860 and now are at least 85 years old. Thus, after long search, the story was completed and it was definitely established that the hickories, black walnut and butternuts were planted by Peter Gideon.



Group of Shagbark Hickories (*Carya ovata*)
Planted by Peter M. Gideon in 1879.

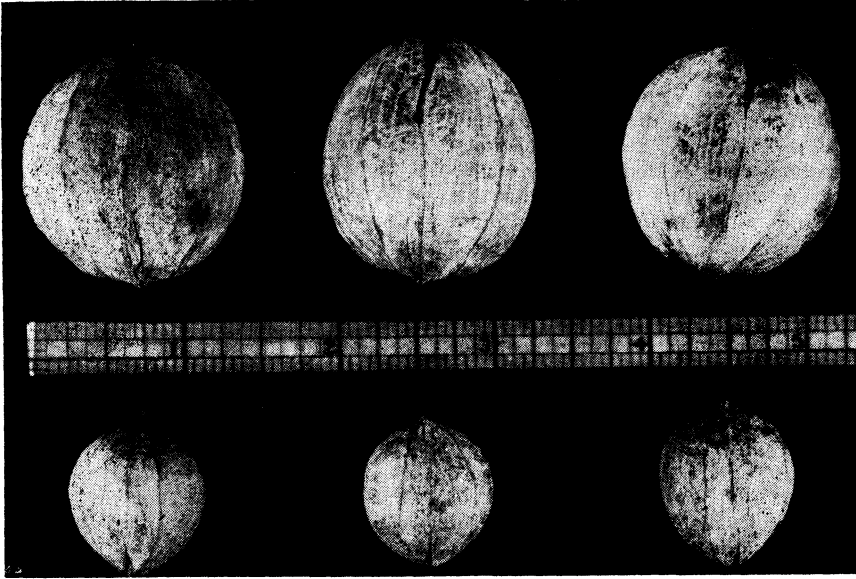
A sequel to the main story concerns the possibility of growing seedlings from nuts borne by the Gideon hickories. It is variously reported that attempts to grow such seedlings have been without success. That the native species (*C. ovata*) is able to reproduce under the prevailing local condition is shown by presence in the grove of four seedling trees varying from about 6 to 20 years of age.

As the trees of the "King Nut" hickory are growing more than 200 miles north of their native range there was some doubt about ability of the nuts to germinate. So a fairly large sample of them was collected in the fall of 1944. Possibly because the fall was very favorable for nuts to mature they may have been in better condition than usual. On examination

about 10 per cent appeared to be imperfectly filled, as often is the case with nut species grown well north of their native range. There were enough well filled nuts, however, to justify an attempt to grow them. Consequently many of the nuts collected were stratified in sand and held until spring in a fruit cellar at a temperature just above freezing. In

April 1945, 27 of the nuts were planted in large pots in a greenhouse to record their behavior. The remainder of the nuts, 117 in number, were planted at the Mayo Forestry and Horticulture Institute at Rochester.

By the end of June, 24 of the 27 nuts planted in pots, or 92 per cent, had sprouted and emerged from the soil. As the pots were too small for the long tap-roots the seedlings were set out in several selected locations. Some were planted by Professor J. D. Winter on his place at Mound, some by Dr. J. J. Christensen at Lakeville, some on the campus at University Farm and others at the Fruit Breeding Farm. A number also were planted by the genial nut enthusiast, R. E. Hodgson, at the Southeast Experiment Station, Waseca. As weather during the growing season was favorable all appeared to be doing well by fall so it seems likely that many seedlings from the original tree will become established. Those who are growing them will find an added interest in their seedlings of this introduced nut tree species because of their direct relationship to one of the trees that evidence Peter Gideon's early interest in nut growing.



Samples of Nuts from the Gideon Trees. Above—*Carya laciniosa*, Shellbark or King Nut Hickory. Below—*Carya ovata*, Native Shagbark Hickory.

Minnesota Garden Flower Society

ALICE M. TISDALE, Editor

Native Foods for the Holiday Dinner

THE first Thanksgiving Day was a celebration of thanks for the New England colonists' first harvest. Many of the foods they gathered then had been grown here before the colonists' arrival, by ingenious agriculturists, the Indians.

Perhaps the most outstanding native American food plant was corn or maize, said to be the oldest of all cereals. The Indians developed it from its wild ancestor and it became a food staple from Canada to Patagonia. Several kinds of squash are American natives, as are lima, kidney and some other types of beans. Both sweet and Irish potatoes are also natives. The first "Irish" potatoes were found by a white man in Colombia and he called them a "kind of ground nut, which when boiled became as soft as a boiled chestnut." By way of Spanish ships, potatoes reached Germany and England and finally Ireland in the seventeenth century. From there they were brought back to the New World. The sweet potato, a cousin of the morning-glory, was first found in the West Indies. When the natives gave some boiled roots to the Columbus expedition, the men called them "not unlike chestnuts in taste."

Although the birthplace of cacao is not known, Brazil, Venezuela and Central America claim its origin and it was certainly a native of one or all of those places. It was cultivated very early in Mexico, but is thought to have been brought there from South America. It was used as a drink, the bean was a medium of exchange, and both the tree and the bean were part of the Indians' religious rites.

The well known manioc root (known also as yucca, mandioca and cassava) is an important item of diet in many tropical countries. It is said to yield six times as much food per acre as wheat. In the U. S. it is used for starch, tapioca, and also in the manufacture of certain chemical products.

Peanuts are another "local plant that has made good." A native of Brazil and Uruguay, the nuts have been found in prehistoric graves in Peru. In present times, we all know how many dozens of uses have been found for this popular nut.

The tomato, greeted at first with hostility, came from western South America. Taken to Europe, it was considered a garden ornament but poison for eating. It took 300 years

for that prejudice to pass. Wild fruits and nuts grew in profusion in the New World, blueberries being reported near Lake Huron in 1615 by Champlain. The cranberries found in northern U. S. were a much larger variety than the ones found in Europe. Other native fruits of North America are the red raspberry, blackberry, huckleberry. Tropical America furnished pineapples (later taken to Hawaii), avocados, guavas and many other fruits. Pecans grew in southern U. S. and Mexico, while cashews and Brazil nuts grew in Brazil. Spaniards found in Mexico an orchid from which the Indians made vanilla. They used it as a flavoring for cocoa. Wild rice was native both to America and to Europe.

All these native plants and more have their places in our holiday feasts of today; but another native of the Americas figures largely, the turkey. First found in Mexico, it was valued more for its fine feathers than for its meat. The early New England birds often weighed sixty pounds or more.

And after the turkey, potatoes, vegetables, fruits and nuts, don't forget the after-dinner cigar, a West Indies contribution. Columbus found natives smoking crude rolls of leaves which had been thrust into hollow