

Milford

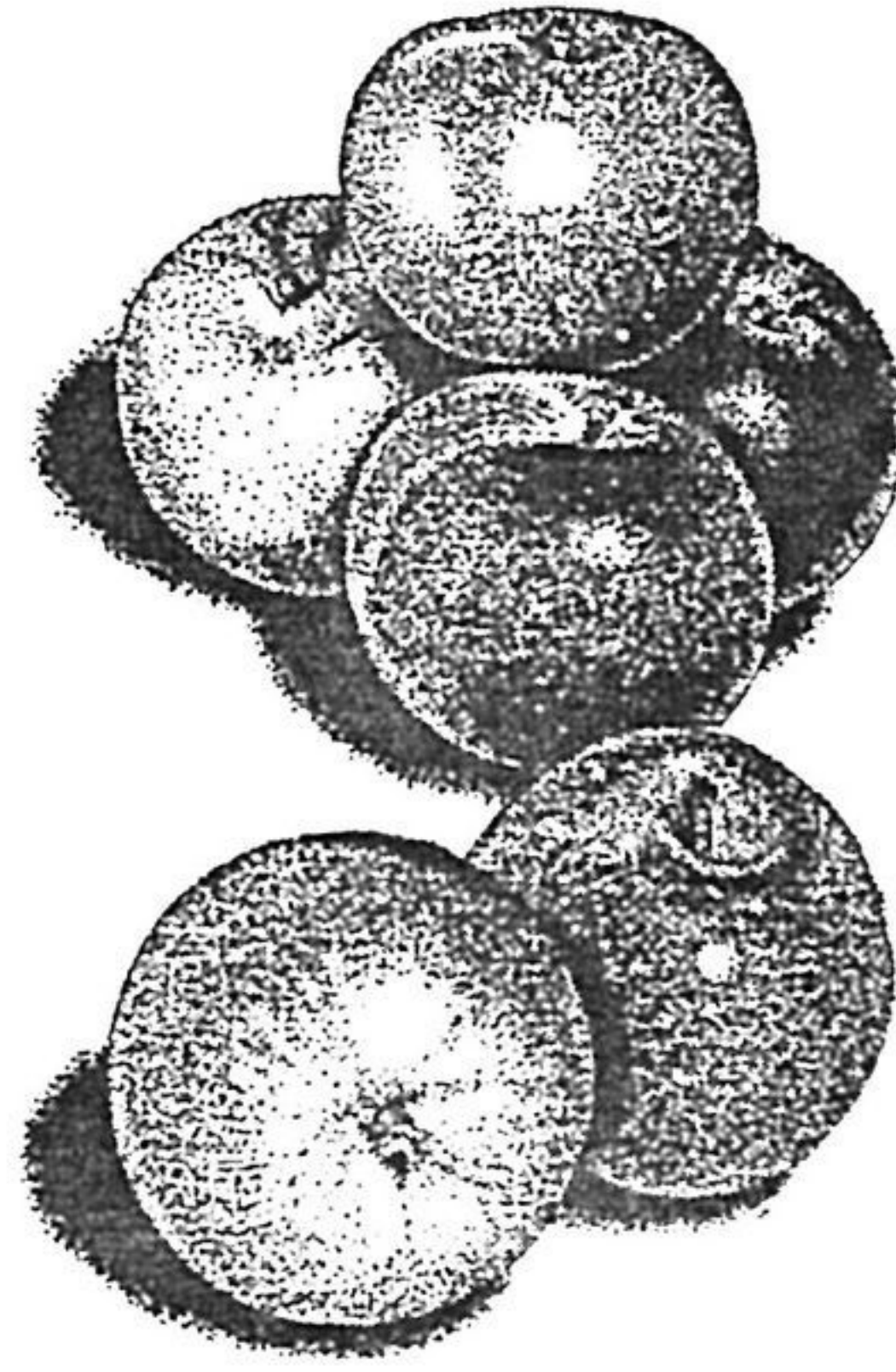
Macs By Eric Moore

When my mother and father bought the white, frame farm house in the tiny rural village of Milford, in eastern Ontario, in 1954, I don't suppose they had the slightest notion it would be their home for the next forty-five years. The 3 bedroom house was a bargain at three thousand dollars, despite the fact it had no running water or central heat. It did, however, come with an acre of land and two MacIntosh apple trees.

The apple trees stood about fifteen feet apart, on the edge of the garden on the east side of the house. They were gnarled and twisted, and one of them was somewhat larger than the other. It came to be known as the "big tree", and its companion as the "little tree". To this day, when a family member talks about those apple trees, whether it's Mom or Dad, my two sisters, or me, we always refer to the "big tree" or the "little tree".

Who planted "Big" and "Little", or how long they had been growing, Mother and Father had no idea. I don't expect Mom and Dad paid much attention to the apple trees back then. They were concerned with far more pressing matters: like newborn babies, and trying to keep their new home warm enough so those babies didn't freeze to death. (When I look back to my childhood winters in that drafty, little, farm house, my memories are of bare feet on toe-curlingly cold linoleum. Of the glass of water on my night stand that turned to ice overnight. And the sobering, cobweb-clearing trek I would make every morning out from underneath cozy quilts, down frigid stairs, to stand beside the tiny, brown, oil-burning stove in the kitchen which faintly radiated something akin to, but not quite like, heat). In fact, I don't think any of us ever gave the trees a second thought. We were glad enough of the apples they provided, but providing apples, was, after all, what apple trees were supposed to do. Practical people, we rural Ontarians.

As the years went by, the family grew and renovations were made to the old farm house. Insulation and aluminium siding eliminated a great many of the drafts. An oil furnace vastly improved the winters. And when I was thirteen years old, hallelujah!, indoor plumbing. The apple trees, on the other hand, which I've no doubt would also have benefited from a little TLC, were left to pretty much fend for themselves. Although I do remember Father taking a saw to the odd limb now and again, neither tree ever



enjoyed anything that even remotely resembled a proper pruning. Neither were "Big" and "Little" ever fertilized or sprayed. They flowered in the spring, yielded apples in the fall, and stood skeletal and dark against the white winter snow until spring returned and the cycle began again. The apple trees were part of the ebb and flow. They simply were. Birds nested in their branches and bumble-bees droned in their white, May blossoms. I climbed in them, tobogganed between them, and in the summertime, when terrific battles between rival gangs would rage across the village, we tied our prisoners to them.

I kept my pockets full of tiny, tart, green apples. They were handy snacks and the rock-hard spheres made ideal missiles to hurl at Daryl Brown across the back yard fence. In September, I fought Yellow Jacket wasps for luscious, ripe, red "grounders" which Mother turned into frothy, pink apple sauce or baked into cinnamon-sweet pies. My sister's pony, Dixie, got her share of the Macs too, and when we had gathered as many apples as the family could use, we hauled baskets full to the mill pond behind the house to share with a family of beavers.

Sometimes, "Big" and "Little" were so loaded down with fruit we feared the branches might snap under the load. Other years, the harvest was greatly reduced, or the scab would be particularly bad. But there was always something. Cold, wet, spring, or dry, hot, summer, we could count on blossoms in May and apples in September. The trees were constant, and steady and dependable.

Although I haven't lived in Milford for twenty years now, my mother and father are still there, still in the same, though vastly improved, white farm house they bought in 1954. The apple trees are still there too. "Big" and "Little" bloomed beautifully this spring, and you can bet your bottom dollar there were apples this fall.

Mom and Dad have talked about moving into town a time or two, even put the house up for sale once, but nothing came of it. Perhaps that's just as well. They would miss Milford. After forty-five years in the same village, the same house, they've put down roots that reach deep into the fabric of the community. They've settled into an easy and comfortable routine. They've become part of the ebb and flow. And I believe, even though Mom and Dad have never really said it in so many words, that over the years they've become very much attached to "Big" and "Little". When they look out their east window onto a riot of May blossoms, or limbs bent low with ripe, September fruit, they no longer see a couple of gnarled and twisted apple trees. They see two old friends. Old friends that, for more than half a century, have remained constant, steady, and dependable.