

FROM JAMAICA TO PERU

THE INEXTRICABLE FORTUNES OF A NORTHERN ADIRONDACK ORCHARD AND THE GENERATIONS OF MEN WHO TRAVEL THOUSANDS OF MILES TO WORK THERE

text and photographs by Ben Stechschulte



AT THE END OF JUNE,

Seth Forrence looked over the orchard from his farmhouse window. An early summer rain had abruptly turned to hail, crashing down on the trees outside. Seth's lived here, in Peru, for 41 years and had never seen hail like this.

The storm passed as quickly as it arrived. Seth and his farm manager Mervan Green—"Granny"—stepped into a row of Honeycrisp trees. Seth twisted a golf ball-size green apple from a limb and turned it over in his fingers. After inspecting its skin for hail damage, his heart sank. As fruit grows to full size, so too will its scars. In the apple industry appearance is everything, and the slightest imperfection can diminish market value.

Seth called his father, Mason, Forrence Orchard's president since his father, Roger, passed on the reins. "Dad," he sighed into his cell phone, "it looks bad."

Meanwhile, Granny made a call home to Jamaica. In rapid patois he recounted details of the hailstorm and set in motion a sprawling phone tree connecting 200 men across the island, some of whom have spent half their lives working the Peru orchard. A damaged crop means fewer apples to pick, which means fewer harvest days, fewer workers needed, fewer apples to sell and, ultimately, less income for the farm and its workers. One hailstorm on a northern Adirondack farm illustrates the inextricable fortunes of families separated by 1,800 miles.

IN THE MID-1800s the Forrence family owned an 18-acre potato farm in Peru, on the Adirondack Park's northeastern border. In the 1940s Virgil Forrence and his sons, Roger, Bill and Virgil Jr., transitioned it to a more profitable enterprise, milking cows, growing berries and Cortland, Snow, Baldwin and Macintosh apples. For decades the soft, tart Macintosh was America's favorite apple, even inspiring the name of Steve Jobs's breakout personal computer, capitalizing on the positive associations with the fruit. And Peru's cold winter temperatures that freeze out most pests and tree diseases put this section of the Champlain Valley at an advantage over more temperate regions like the Hudson Valley and Pacific Northwest. Other orchards popped up in Peru, putting this place on the map as an apple destination. But with weather patterns rapidly changing, including damaging hailstorms, those advantages are narrowing.

Today—and four generations later—Forrence Orchard is a patchwork of 1,200 acres with about 500,000 trees in production, stretching to the shore of Lake Champlain. It remains

The family-owned orchard is a patchwork of 1,200 acres stretching to the shore of Lake Champlain, with a half-million trees in production. Pages 30-31: Walton Scott, a 20-year veteran of Forrence Orchard, mid-harvest. Joel Levy picks Macintosh apples. The fruit isn't so much picked as gently twisted off the branch. This quick and precise wrist motion is repeated thousands of times a day.



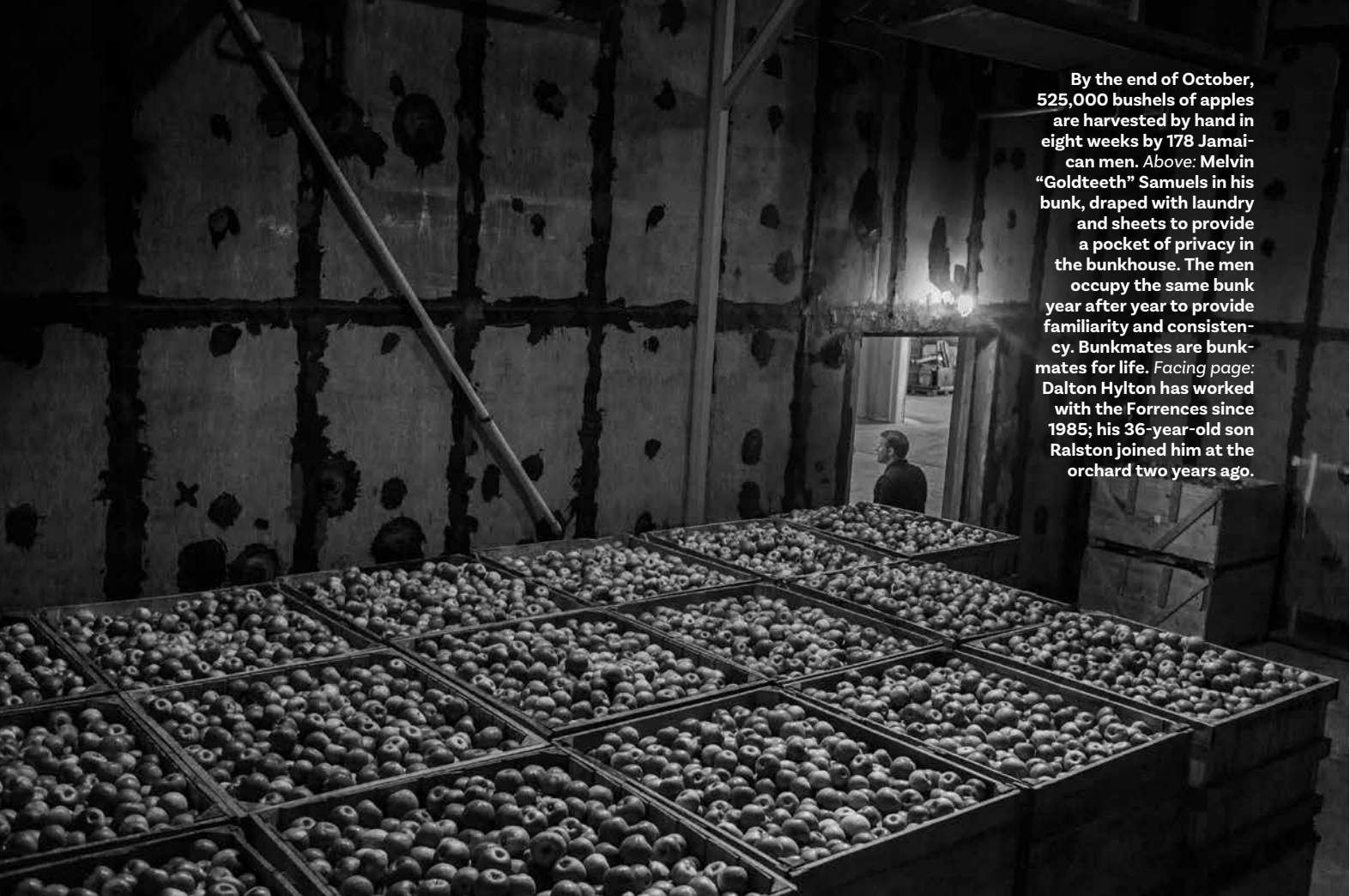
family-owned and operated by Virgil's grandsons Mason, Macintosh ("Mac") and Peter; Mason's son, Seth; and Peter's son, Henry. But consumer tastes don't stay the same. Seventy-five percent of the apples grown at Forrence are Macintosh, but sweeter, crunchier varieties such as Honeycrisp, SnowSweet, RubyFrost and SnapDragon are also grown as they increase in popularity. Forecasting changes in consumer preferences is imprecise and expensive. It can take three years for a new variety of apple tree to reach production.

Honeycrisp, in particular, is in high demand. The apple is

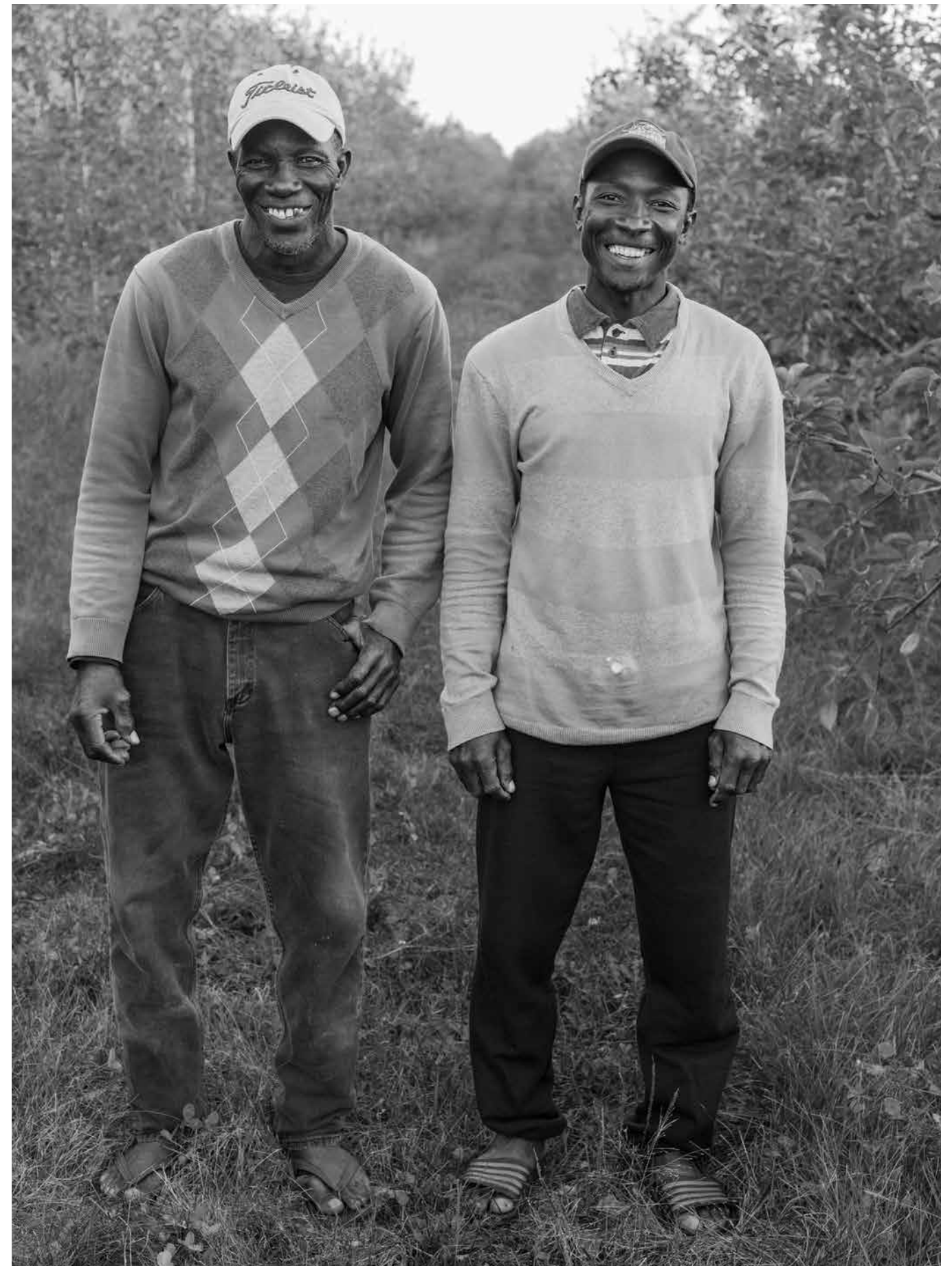
valuable in nearly any condition, fetching almost twice the price of other varieties. It's not just humans who prefer it; because of its high sugar content, Honeycrisp is favored by crows, turkeys and deer. During picking, the apple's thin skin is easily punctured by the stems of other apples in the bin and offers little protection against bruising. A skilled, experienced crew is a must to ensure a successful, profitable harvest.

SEVEN THOUSAND JAMAICAN agricultural workers were hired on farms from Michigan to Vermont through the

U.S. Department of Labor's 2015 H-2A visa program. A version of the program dates back to World War II, when guest workers from Barbados, the Bahamas, Jamaica and other islands filled in for East Coast farmers' labor shortages. The H-2A program was formalized in the late 1980s to grant non-immigration visas to foreign unskilled agricultural labor, allowing workers to stay legally in this country for up to nine months a year. The program is highly regulated in both the U.S. and Jamaica, where the men are carefully vetted. There's an annual physical exam and application to ensure the workers are physically fit and eligible



By the end of October, 525,000 bushels of apples are harvested by hand in eight weeks by 178 Jamaican men. Above: Melvin "Goldteeth" Samuels in his bunk, draped with laundry and sheets to provide a pocket of privacy in the bunkhouse. The men occupy the same bunk year after year to provide familiarity and consistency. Bunkmates are bunkmates for life. Facing page: Dalton Hylton has worked with the Forrences since 1985; his 36-year-old son Ralston joined him at the orchard two years ago.





Lloyd Jackson studies the branches of the trees as he prunes summer "suckers" to control growth and allow sunlight to ripen the fruit.



for travel to the States. If an applicant has a criminal record he loses his eligibility in the program.

Roger Forrence began hiring Jamaican seasonal workers to work on his Peru farm in the mid-1970s. Up until then the apples at Forrence Orchard were mostly picked by locals and men stationed at the Plattsburgh Air Force Base, but that workforce became increasingly unreliable. The Jamaicans are essential to the Forrence family's operation. Without them the orchard would go out of business.

Most years Forrence hires as many as 240 workers a season. Each worker costs the farm upwards of \$1,500 for travel and visa. But the H-2A program ensures an experienced labor force. (Forrence Orchard advertises picker jobs in regional newspapers and through the U.S. Department of Labor; in a decade just two Americans have applied to pick fruit.)

That apple picking is considered unskilled labor is a misnomer. It takes two seasons for a picker to develop the visual skills, coordination, technique and speed to be efficient. During a picker's first season he's partnered with a veteran picker to learn how and what to pick. Just as there's an accumulated product at harvest from years of relentless and careful maintenance of the trees, there's an accumulated knowledge base, a cultivated brain trust passed along generation to generation. Thirty sets of fathers and sons pick together at Forrence. Some of the men have worked in Peru for most of their lives. Granny first came to the farm in 1979, when he was 19 years old. After almost 40 seasons he's indispensable to the orchard's daily operations. There are others who have dedicated that kind of time.

Clockwise from top: Mason Forrence examines a fire blight-infected tree, one of 7,000 trees killed by the disease on the farm last year. After a long day of work, the Jamaicans retire to their bunkhouses to read books, gather around TVs to watch the evening news, or play dominoes. Rows of spindly Macintosh trees resemble a vineyard. This modern style of cultivation allows energy and nutrients a more direct, efficient route to the trees' growing fruit.

For the Jamaicans, orchard work is reliable and consistent. Every Friday they wire their wages via Western Union to their families, who depend on the extra income to educate their children, finance their own farming operations, build homes and pay for funerals and medical care. It comes at a cost. The men's energy is focused on an eight-week window. They've come to make money, and many pickers volunteer to work six or seven days a week to log as many hours as possible. They live a Spartan, disciplined life. While here, many see little beyond the rows of apples. Weeks and months away can be hard on families. At dawn and dusk men stand outside the bunkhouses speaking into cell phones to loved ones back home. It's a life of sacrifices and rewards.

THE JUNE HAILSTORM blew in from the north. The fruit and leaves on the orchard's north side looked as if they'd been peppered with buckshot. The hail scarred the trees, leaving the tender cambium layer exposed and prone to infection, which came in the form of fire blight. The afflicted trees oozed an amber resin contaminated with the bacteria, which spread rapidly in the orchard, killing some 7,000 (Continued on page 78)

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trees. Much of the summer was spent removing the infected trees and burning the wood to quarantine the highly contagious disease.

The season continued to be a challenge. The summer brought near-drought conditions and, because of the focus on fire blight, the orchard wasn't thinned at the beginning of the season, leading to fruit considered small by industry standards. Typically an apple tree is harvested two to four times as the fruit ripens, but because of the hail damage, many trees were stripped of their apples all at once. The imperfect fruit still finds a market: skins are steamed off to make sauce and juice, as blemishes don't affect the flavor of the otherwise healthy fruit. And because other orchards were also hit by the storm, there were shortages of the best "fancy" fruit across the region.

At the end of the harvest the orchard looked freshly scrubbed. Winter clothing and boots were hung in lockers, ready for next September's harvest. The night before the buses pulled up to the farm to begin the pickers' journey home, the entire camp gathered in the dining room. The men, with cans of Busch and Labatt Blue in their hands, rested heavy on picnic-table benches, fatigued from eight weeks of picking. The final week was the most grueling as they bent at the waist, filled five-gallon buckets with the apples that had fallen to the ground, and chopped away undergrowth with machetes.

"All right, gentlemen," said Seth, as he lifted his can. "Thank you very much for all the help this year. We're very appreciative, fathers and uncles. It wasn't an easy one to pick, glad that everyone is healthy, going home to families."

The bodies of these men are permanently hardened by shovels, wheelbarrows and harvest buckets. They're among the countless laborers who make their way to American shores to work the most unglamorous and physical jobs to better the lives of their faraway families. At Forrence Orchard, they stepped into the crisp October night and prepared for their journey back to Jamaica. ▲