The Ecological Oral Histories project, facilitated by the Ecological Monitoring & Assessment (EMA) Program & Foundation and the Master of Liberal Studies (MLS) Program, provided the opportunity for Northern Arizona University (NAU) students to interview long-term residents of the Colorado Plateau. These first-hand accounts document changes in the natural environment and ecological ethics.

“Back in those days, a man would walk thirty miles just to get enough money to buy a sack of beans.” Sitting in the apple packing shed where he learned to rollerskate, Tom Pendley fondly recalls how his father Frank had come to Oak Creek Canyon after hearing about “a cool place in central Arizona, good for fishing.” Tom’s father had been working on Roosevelt Dam. “When my dad filed on this property, he told me stories that people wore out their shoe leather walking from Phoenix to Roosevelt Dam for work.” Frank and his friend Ed Cauley scouted the canyon on burros between 1907 and 1909, and Pendley filed a claim on the property in 1910. “First, it took him two years to establish the water ... the thing that made this property valuable is the water,” says Tom. “If it weren’t for that little trickle of water runnin’ down that creek there wouldn’t be anything here. It’s water! I can’t stress that enough.”

Before he could start planting apple trees Frank Pendley had to get water to his land. “Well, it was quite an engineering masterpiece, just the tunnels themselves. One of the tunnels is 125 feet long, and the other one is about 70 feet long, through solid red rock, and they blasted through ... He surveyed it with a rifle, a tripod, and a plumb-bob, and he shot from tree to tree to get his grade.”
The Pendley Homestead House, completed in 1927, by Frank Pendley.

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--Tom Pendley

Meanwhile, Tom continues, “He planted his first orchard in 1912, got that planted before the ditch came in. And right out from where the big house is today, there’s a spot where there’s a windlass, and he drew water out of the creek, and carried the water in five-gallon buckets with a yoke on his neck—he carried water, 10 gallons at a time, up to each individual tree ... planted probably 75 trees, maybe 100.” The Arkansas Black Heritage Tree is the oldest tree still living from that original planting.

Frank Pendley married 18-year-old Jane Hutchinson in 1921. Jane grew up on a homestead further up Oak Creek, south of West Fork. “Her pets were the deer and wild things,” recalls her son. She was “a pretty savvy lady. You know those homesteaders, they had to be savvy. I might be a little savvy myself, maybe.” At about the same time the couple got married, the trees from Mr. Pendley’s original planting started to bear fruit. “It took eight years for the trees to start bearing, and the first ones started bearing ... probably 1920 or ‘21 ... he hauled those by team and wagon to Flagstaff. Babbitt Brothers was his first market.” The family continued to expand their markets around northern Arizona to Winslow, Holbrook, and Williams. In the early 1930s, he expanded his market to Phoenix and Tucson and in 1932 built the packing shed. The original polisher/sorter still runs to this day in the apple packing shed.

To produce fruit the apple blossoms have to be pollinated. “There were a lot of native bees here of different kinds. But to ensure adequate pollination, we brought in several hives of bees to make sure during that pollination period. You don't know what the weather's going to be like, and you have maybe a window—a new term—just a small period of time to get this pollination done. And so the more pollinators—the more bees—you have a better chance of getting adequate pollination.”

Apple blossoms are very susceptible to cold snaps. “When I was operating it myself, we had a real good crop comin’ in 1970, and the temperature—myself and other growers [like] Mr. Jordan down in Sedona—we were all fighting frost. [That spring] we fought like the dickens. The National Weather Service gave us a pretty good heads up, but that time that wasn’t [just a] frost, it was a freeze. The temperature, I think, went down to 17 degrees, and you can't fight 17 degrees. So we burned a lot of oil for several nights. I think we smudged for eight or nine nights, maybe thousands of dollars’ worth of diesel, and still wound up losin’ the crop.”

The Pendleys cultivated apples, apricots, peaches, strawberries,
thrips. But the first pest he knew about, was aware of, was the codling moth, and he bought his first sprayer the same year I was born, 1923. He also bought his first truck to haul fruit with, a REO Speedwagon ... Thrip spraying hadn’t really come into—they didn’t become aware of it probably until the forties ... and also, during that time, there was an insect called a woolly apple aphid, and they had a problem with that. Today, they finally got a biological control of that woolly apple aphid so it’s now controlled with a little ol’ wasp. So it’s no problem anymore.”

Much of the water in the canyon is subterranean, but Tom Pendley says that you can tell where the water is by watching the plants. “After you live a hundred years, growin’ up down this canyon, you learn where the water is. There’s telltales. I mean, when we’re young, we don’t pay attention, but once you get older, you start paying’ attention to what’s happenin’. Like a blackberry, I can show you spots where you wouldn’t think—no reason for a blackberry to be, but that blackberry, if there’s any water around, that blackberry will grow. The same thing is true of the black walnut.”

Tourism started in the canyon in the 1930s. “I graduated from eighth grade in 1936, about [when] the road was paved ... trout season used to start the first of June, and then there was always ... lot of people from local—you know, Flagstaff. When I was a kid these pools, like the pool below the bridge ... I’ve seen that thing so full of trout you couldn’t believe it.” By the 1960s tourism was in full swing, and in 1963, when Tom took over the homestead from his father, he was selling much of his fresh produce at a roadside stand.

Tom’s experience working in commercial agriculture served him well in caring for the orchards and farms, especially with battling insects and diseases. “I spent seven years as an agricultural field rep, selling fertilizer and insecticides to farmers here in the west [Phoenix] valley.” When his father first planted the orchard, “he didn’t have any insect pests until the trees got into production, which would have been after eight years. At that time, that was before they knew about the thrips.

The Pendley family worked the land and sold produce until 1985, when they sold the homestead to the Arizona Parklands Foundation, which in turn sold it to the Arizona State Parks Board. Many fruit and nut trees remain productive, though most visitors today walk right past the orchard on their way to the creek and never connect with the long history and beauty of the place. The names of the apple varieties once grown in Oak Creek Canyon sound like poetry: Maiden’s Blush, Wolf River, King David, Ben Davis, White Winter Pearmain, Rome Beauty, Black Twig, Mammoth Black Twig, Gano, Winesap, Jonathan, Grimes Golden, Golden Delicious, Starking Double Red Delicious, and Arkansas Black. Each has an intriguing flavor, texture, color, and scent. The colorful Gano apple is a rare derivative from a Ben Davis seedling found on a Native American farm in 1834, and now the Arkansas Black is a rather common heirloom in the Midwest and South that is nevertheless rare in Arizona.
But like at other historic orchards in the canyon, the trees at the Pendley orchard are dying from old age. Apple trees have a lifespan of about 100 years or less in arid or drought-stricken areas. That is why the Ecological Monitoring & Assessment Program & Foundation and the Center for Sustainable Environments (CSE) at Northern Arizona University are working with Slide Rock State Park to ensure that these heirloom varieties can continue to thrive at this historic homestead. In the spring of 2007 Kanin Routson of CSE and Brad Blake of the NAU Research Greenhouse Complex took cuttings from the trees and grafted them onto new rootstock. The grafted trees will be replanted in the orchards at Slide Rock State Park where they can be enjoyed by another century of park visitors.

Today, Frank and Jane Pendley’s children and grandchildren sometimes come to the homestead to recount to park visitors the stories their family members have shared with each other through the years. They hope that the homestead will survive for future generations to treasure, giving them an idea of what it was like living in the canyon in the early 1900s. We thank the Pendleys for sharing their legacy.

Map of Slide Rock State Park and the Pendley Homestead orchards and buildings. An application has been submitted to include the orchards in the National Register of Historic Places.