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About Old Apple Trees and Cousins. About 20 years ago, my dad told me that a herd of elk had fatally damaged the old apple tree in the back yard. When they are very hungry during the hardest part of winter, the elk come down from the high mountains and eat the bark off fruit trees. I was disappointed because the 100+ year old tree produced small but wonderful yellow apples, very sweet, and I was planning on eventually living on the folk's land after they passed.

The next time I visited, I checked on the old tree, and it was almost girdled by the elk, and only half a trunk of bark was left, which almost always is fatal for a tree. I carefully pruned it to help the old tree recover and each year, I pruned it a little more. It produced some blooms and some apples but was also producing bark that began to cover the bare wood areas (see the close-up photo). The old tree was fighting for life and winning.

In the year I first wrote this story, as you can see from the photos, it was in full bloom, like before the injury, and we looked forward to a good crop of some of the best apples you ever had. This year (2021), it was loaded with apples we could use and share with our friends. This morning in first light, I saw 5 large mule deer bucks under the tree, eating fallen apples.

I have many surviving VDB first cousins who are in their 80's and 90's. Many have lived lives full of adventure as coal miners, loggers, ranchers, and welders. My late cousin Earl, when a welder in his late 50's, was building and climbing cell phone towers around the country, a very rough job for a tough man. He never gave up, and at when he was over 80 could still outwork many people decades his junior. Yes, these cousins of mine have had some pruning, too -- knees and hips replaced, survived heart attacks, wear hearing aids, had back surgeries -- but still blossom as strong community members, are good to their families, and bear the fruit of tenacity and endurance.

My cousin Annie, who is younger than me, is a great grandmother and is fiercely committed to all those kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids. My cousin Jeanine still works as an RN in a hospital, and I never talked to anyone who knows her who does not exclaim about her kindness and healing ways. I could go on and on with examples, but my surviving first cousins – Gary, Les, Ted, George, John T., John D., Elaine, Jeanine, Jan, Nancy, Dollie, David, Bud, Annie are like my old apple tree. They produce sweet fruit in their love and commitment to those around them and have produced my 60+ second and third cousins, many of whom I am in touch with, all of whom I treasure.

Life is not easy. The elk come in many forms, and nibble away. But, life is beautiful if you keep at it, have good support, and keep producing fruit. The pruning hurts sometimes, but it is often life-saving. Those strong roots of love and persistence stay alive.

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(originally written in 2013 and updated in 2021).*

