

village view

by Andrea Leonard

It must run in the family. What? The urge to break into print. The following article has been written by my niece, Judith Leonard Van Leeuwen, whose husband Peter operates the Osterville Bike and Mower Shop at the corner of Main and Pond Streets in this village.

At a recent family gathering, she suggested I might write a column about cranberries, and I invited her to do a guest column for me, and this is the result.

Like many old Cape roads, the winding "back way" into Osterville is marked by at least a half-dozen snow-covered cranberry bogs. For over a century, the Cape's agricultural industry has been dominated by these tasty, colorful berries.

Known to the Pilgrims as "craneberries," cranberries were once gathered only from wild vines. About 1819 cultivation was significantly improved by Henry (Uncle Hiram) Howes, a native of Dennis.

He noticed the vigor and productivity of his vines after they had been accidentally covered with a layer of blowing sand. By the middle of the 19th century, cranberry-growing was well-established in Barnstable County.

Usually family enterprises, the bogs were worked by hand for many years. Every fall crews of pickers crept across the bogs on their knees scooping the ripe berries from the vines.

Teams of horses hauled the barrels of harvested berries to the local railroad depot where they were shipped to Boston or, if of especially good quality, to New York. Several varieties were developed and each carried the name of the Cape family which grew that particular kind of berry: such names as Howes, Hall, and Smalley identified the cranberry varieties.

Last May I spent an afternoon with Arthur Cahoon of Dennis who once worked at the Crosby boat yard on West Bay in Osterville. During the nineteen-forties he helped bring back into production many of the cranberry bogs which had been abandoned during the years of World War II.

"Not many people appreciate," he told me, "how sophisticated a system of flooding and draining was developed for the bogs when they were originally built.

"To provide adequate irrigation and to protect the vines from frost, water was pumped from ponds through ditches and from bog to bog. Clearing the ditches and maintaining the pumps required attention much of the year."

A few months after my talk with Mr. Cahoon, R. L. (Link) Thacher of Harwich invited my son's Cub Scout troop to take a closer look at his bog operations. He owns several bogs, some as small as an acre, and one, located near the Mid-Cape Highway in Yarmouth, of close to thirty acres.

Mr. Thacher grows three varieties of berries: Howes, Early Blacks, and a few Old Natives. In a good year each acre produces about 150 barrels or seven-and-a-half tons of berries. Trailer trucks are rented to haul the berries to Middleboro where they are sorted and screened.

Not so long ago, he informed me, each grower processed his own berries. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hall of Depot Street in Harwich still set up their separator in their garage each fall (usually late September through October). Anyone who's curious about cranberries and bogs is welcome to stop for a look and to buy berries, fresh off the vine.

For the grower, work continues even after the harvest. Mr. Thacher was sanding a bog near Long Pond when our group of Cub Scouts arrived at mid-afternoon early in November. A small loader heaved scoops of screened sand over a vibrating grate attached to the balloon-tired machines which scooted back and forth across the bogs.

The three men operating it had worked since early morning to sand several bogs. "We have to make sure the sanding is done during a dry spell," he explained. "Rain, the day after sanding, would rot the vines."

He asked one of the boys to go down to the bog and pick five or six vines. With the boys "all ears", he told them about the plants brought back to him.

"Now, this here's a briar. We hate 'em. They strangle the vines and ruin a good bog.

"All right now, here's something I'd like to show you. This berry's still on the vine. That's this year's berry. But next

year's will be growing here, on this last half-inch of the vine, and we've got to protect it for a full thirteen months -- from August of one year, to September of the next.

"You know, boys, the vines in this bog are eighty years old and they grow very slowly. That's why the only time I like to see kids on a bog is when it's frozen," he remarked with a smile.

He turned, then, to point out a lone gray building which houses machinery; it had once been used for on-site processing.

Empty swallowhouses, summer homes for insect eaters dotted the brick-red expanse of the bog. The sanders were humming back, ready to be reloaded, as we headed for our cars in the chill autumn dusk.

For those of you who might be interested in the history of the industry, I would suggest reading **Cannonballs and Cranberries**, a book written by Fredrika A. Burrows and published by the W. S. Sullwold Company of Taunton, Massachusetts, in 1976. The book is available in both paperback and hardcover at local bookstores, or your local library may have a copy.

As a treat for the birds, who have tough sledding during the long weeks when their food-sources are ice- and snow-bound, my sons and I have strung popcorn and cranberries on long threads and hung them outside.

The whole family enjoys watching our feathered friends partaking thankfully of this supplement to their diet.

As a treat for two-legged friends, we mix up and bake these ingredients for Cranberry-Orange Bread; it's just as much appreciated by them as the cranberry and popcorn is by birds.

2 cups flour
1 cup sugar
½ tsp salt
1-½ tsp. baking powder
½ tsp. soda
2 tbsp. shortening
grated rind and juice of 1 orange plus water to make ¾ cup
1 egg, beaten
1 cup cranberries, halved

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease loaf pan (9"x5"x3"). Blend dry ingredients. Mix and add melted shortening, orange juice mixture and egg. Fold in berries. Bake one hour. Cool thoroughly before slicing. Good toasted.

And that's why I've concluded it "runs in the family."