village view

by Andrea Leonard

Once upon a time... there wasn't any Labor Day. Congress created the national holiday in 1894, less than a decade after Samuel Gompers helped organize the AFL at Columbus, Ohio, in 1886.

Chicago's Haymarket riot erupted in 1886; ten people died in 1892 when guards battled strikers at the Carnegie steel mill at Homestead, Pennsylvania; President Cleveland called out U.S. troops to quell violence in the Chicago Pullman strike in 1894, the same year Labor Day was officially proclaimed.

Labor's day had come; its sun had risen; the first Monday of September honors the working man.

Before there was any Labor Day, cool nights of September came as usual to Cape Cod, warning of frosts to follow, just as they do today.

In the part of Barnstabletown called Newtown, now Santuit and the western part of Marstons Mills, cranberry harvest time drew near. The Winslow and Old Company bogs were among the first to be built in this part of the Cape.

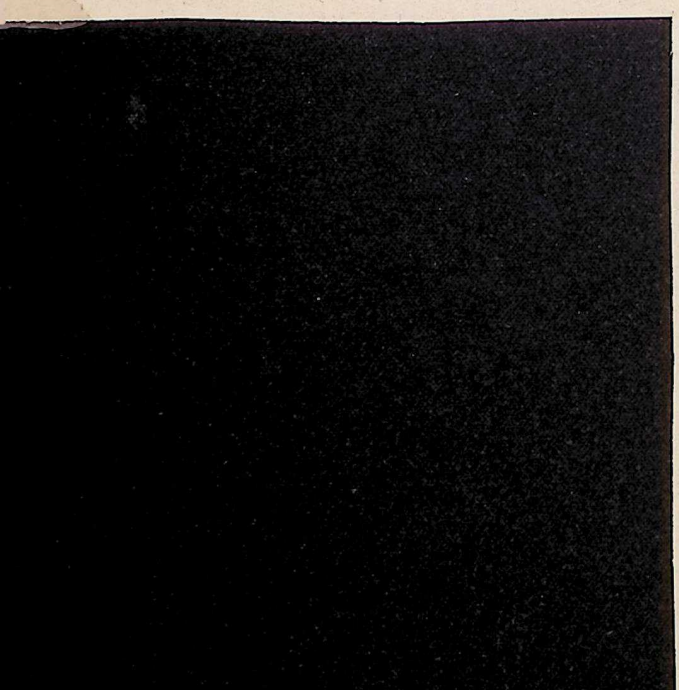
Before the first of October most of the berries must be harvested, for one night's heavy frost will ruin every berry on the bogs, berries ripened by sun and rain throughout the long summer.

A big cranberry bog is a beautiful sight on a pleasant fall morning with the berries gleaming on the vines. Acres of clear level fields, deep amethyst in color, bring to mind Sarah Dixon's description, "A Persian carpet that never saw a loom."

The bog is cut into oblongs by ditches, each section divided into rows five or six feet wide; as the pickers move forward end to end, the vines are left clean of berries and the color changes from russet to green.

On a mid-September day in 1890, a flurry of activity comes with the report picking will begin tomorrow. The word passes from mouth to mouth for there's no telephone to spread the news. "Picking will start at Lovell's Pond bog." Or at Winslow's. Or at the Company's. All pickers are to be paid 3 cents a quart.

The Company bog lies just back of Newtown; all those from Osterville who want to pick must meet at the Hayscales in the center of the village at 8 A.M. Pickers, knowing they'll stay all day, pack basket lunches.



You don't go cranberrying aboard a cushion-seated auto traveling at 40 or 50 MPH, but in a lug wagon possessing not a spring in its whole construction. The seats are boards laid across the body. The horsedrawn wagon travels at six to eight MPH, depending on road conditions.

The unpaved lane leads through Marstons Mills, turns off into Newtown and peters out. The wagon bounces on across the fields where lie the bogs.

Young boys sit in the tail of the cart, feet hanging down. They jump off and on at will, while the girls and grown-ups perch close together on the seats, hanging on for dear life, and hoping the next jounce will be no worse than the last.

At the bog there are already assembled a small army of boys, girls, men, and a goodly number of women. To many housewives, cranberrying is an opportunity to spend a whole day in the open, meet old friends, and a chance to earn much-needed cash.

Everyone wears a hat for the sun can be hot; most women tie on sunbonnets to protect their fair skins; tanned faces are out of fashion, to be avoided at all costs.

"Miss Lucy" (Jones; is in charge of the tally sheets; Mr. Nathan, her husband, the overseer. Miss Lucy takes your name and gives a number along with a shiny new six-quart measure, banded like a measuring cup to show each quart.

When the sun has dried the dew on the vines, the pickers are directed across the creek and lined up, two pickers to a row. Mr. Nathan lays down the rules. "Don't tear the vines, pick clean, leave no berries to be crushed on the ground."

At the call, "All right!" everybody plumps down on their knees and the scramble begins. The only sound for a time is the rattle fo the first berries in the tin measures. After a while the pickers relax a little and compare progress.

Soon a number is called. "You don't think he's filled a measure so soon? The berries must be thicker at that end than here." **You** have found the berries firmly attached and the vines unkind to bare hands.

As the sun climbs to the zenith, you wonder if you'll ever be able to stand erect again and your back is one big ache. The welcome call "Twelve o'clock. Knock off," comes booming across the field. What a pleasure to stop!

Your measure and a garment are left to mark your place, and you join the others to rest and visit while enjoyin the basket lunches. Four o'clock brings another happy release.

You jolt home quite contented -- with four measures and 72 cents to your credit. Some have picked as many as 40 or 50 quarts earning $1.20 or $1.50, but they're the smart ones in a class by themselves.

The real reward is having two leisurely weeks to spend in the open air and sunshine with good company.

After the harvest comes the long season of screening the berries, a process of funneling them into a long V-shaped tray with a slat bottom. Three screeners work each side of the tray. Women prove best at this job, the one at the mouth of the screen making sure each berry passing under her hands is ready for market.

Cape Cod cranberries are in great demand; more bogs and more pickers are needed. Soon Mr. Lumbert of Centerville will invent the handmade wooden scoop, destined to become a collector's item.

In practice, the scoop proves too heavy for women to handle, but it's generally accepted by the men and becomes the forerunner of modern cranberry harvesters.

Mechanized equipment has left the willings hands and friendly rivalry far behind but demonstrates once again Yankee ingenuity and our abiding faith in the productivity of Cape Cod sand.

Labor Day or no Labor Day, the cranberries must be harvested before the first heavy frost and marketed in time for serving with Thanksgiving and Christmas turkey dinners.