

VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

VILLAGE ADVERTISER October 7, 1982

Cranberry bogs, this time of year, always take on a gorgeous hue; the greens of summer give way to the rich ruby reds of autumn, and then everyone familiar with bogs knows the harvest is about to begin.

The key phrase, here, is "everyone familiar with bogs." Although we take them for granted and think we know all about them because they've been around a lot longer than any of us, new facts keep coming to light. If I, who might be called a "bog-trotter" by birth, am still learning about them, what of newcomers to Cape Cod?

Some years ago I heard about the Indians introducing cranberries to the Pilgrims who called them craneberries at first. I assumed the Pilgrims thought heron were cranes, and seeing heron feeding on the wild berries, named the fruit for the birds. It turns out that wasn't the reason at all; their name, I now find, came from the little pink flower that appears on the vines in June. The blossom resembles a tiny nodding crane, hence, craneberry.

Just how anyone, today, knows which story (or if either, for that matter) is true, I can't explain. It seems unlikely any 17th century historian would record such an insignificant detail.

That cranberries were once a wild crop, we do know. The vines grew in the dunes in hollow depressions where fresh water collected in pockets underlain with clay deposits. There the plants' environmental requirements were met by the elements. Rains supplied needed moisture; winds replenished sandy top-dressing necessary to each year's new growth.

So abundant were the wild berries, little effort was made to grow them commercially until after 1850. Like blueberries, blackberries and beachplums today, the fruit was plentiful enough to supply local demand. Gathered from the wild, packed in barrels, and covered with spring water, cranberries were shipped abroad in early colonial days. Sailing men took cranberries with them to sea for the vitamin-C-laden fruit helped prevent scurvy. Seafarers might not have known why, but they knew eating cranberries regularly kept the dread disease at bay.

Even today its medicinal qualities are recognized; people afflicted with kidney stones are often advised to drink cranberry juice daily.

What sparked commercial bogs? A combination of economic circumstance laid the foundation for the industry. Cape Codders of the early 1800's depended for income on whaling, salt from evaporated seawater and fishing (both fin and shell).

With the discovery of oil in Pennsylvania, the whaling industry died. With the mining of salt in Michigan, the salt-works business collapsed. Bays that produced tons of shellfish silted up; fin-fishing saw competition grow in sea-coast cities; new and expensive equipment brought competition the slim pockets of Cape Codders couldn't match.

The Cape needed a commercial crop. The Cape needed a business with low labor costs and a good return on a small investment. It wasn't long after that before bogs were producing cranberries enough to more than keep up with a growing market.

There were times, indeed, when the supply far exceeded demand. Bogmen met the crisis by developing new ways to use their products; instead of concentrating on the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, recipes for using the colorful fruit year round became known throughout the country. Demand soon exceeded supply, prices rose, and raising cranberries commercially spread first to New Jersey and then to Wisconsin.

Before that, though, and as early as 1866, cranberry men formed the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association. In 1898, R.C. Randall of Wareham built the first cranberry processing plant. He sold his syrups and jams under the name "Ruby Phosphate," and some growers with many acres under cultivation made small fortunes from the tart little berry.

As early as 1906, the Cranberry Station of Massachusetts Agricultural Experiment Station was established at East Wareham. The station continues, today, to develop new growing techniques and provide service to growers.

Another milestone in the history of the berry was reached in 1912 with the organization of the United Cape Cod Cranberry Company. This establishment built a large-scale processing plant where berries were stored, frozen, crushed, canned, juiced and bottled. The company later combined with Cranberry Cannery, Inc., to become the National Cranberry Association that now manufactures Ocean Spray products.

Bogs became Big Business. Because National bought all the fruit at wholesale prices, small bog owners could always find a market for their crop. While enormous profits were no longer realized, cranberry bogs brought owners a comfortable supplemental income.

More recently, disaster struck the industry. On November 9, 1959, just before the holiday season, the U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare announced that aminotriazole (a weed killer used in some bogs) was carcinogenic and that residues had been found in some berries.

Cranberry products disappeared from grocery store shelves. Between 1960 and 1963 prices dropped to new lows; many growers, especially small ones, abandoned their bogs.

Cranberries need a weed-free environment to produce fruit; they cannot compete with weeds and grasses among the vines. Hiring labor to weed by hand was exorbitantly expensive; if chemical weed killers made the fruit unmarketable, growing cranberries was no longer profitable. But newer safe chemical weed killers were soon developed, and the industry recovered. Most large growers and some small ones survived the incident, and cranberries returned to shelves in greater quantities than ever.

Another crisis, however, struck in 1961. On Memorial Day, that year, a third of the Massachusetts crop was lost when the temperature dropped below freezing and killed tender vines. The weather changed so quickly that night, the bogs could not be flooded in time to protect the plants.

Between 1962 and 1966 many growers finally took the advice of the Cranberry Experiment Station and installed sprinkler systems to avoid frost-kills. The investment was money well-spent; during that four-year period, the northeast suffered through a prolonged drought. Sprinkler systems saved thousands of acres of bogs that otherwise would have been destroyed by the lowered water table.

Once again, as the season for cranberry sauce is upon us, we find the shiny red berries in markets. Want to try a new and easy way to make sauce for holiday dinners? Wash and drain a pint of cranberries and pour into a quart casserole. Sprinkle with a cup of sugar and a teaspoon of grated lemon peel. Cover tightly and bake half-an-hour at 325 degrees or until berries begin to pop. Stir well, let cool, and refrigerate.

It's so easy you don't have to wait 'til Thanksgiving to enjoy cranberry sauce.