



## COUNTRY PRIMER

# YOUR HOLIDAY CRANBERRIES MAY COME FROM MY PARENTS' PLACE!

By Sharon Selz, Assistant Editor

*Even those of us who love the country can always learn more about it. This "Country Primer" series taps the talents of authorities on various country subjects. This time one of our editors describes cranberry harvest on her parents' farm.*



Cornelius Hogenbirk

NUMBER  
**16**  
IN A  
SERIES

WHEN autumn's in the air, as it is today, I long to be home on my parents' cranberry farm in the heart of rural Wisconsin. This is an especially exciting time of year there.

I'm an assistant editor on the *Country* staff and, as part of my editorial duties, I handle the "Day in the Country" diary series for each issue. In the process of selecting these "diarists" and arranging for the photos, I have lots of long conversations with down-home country people.

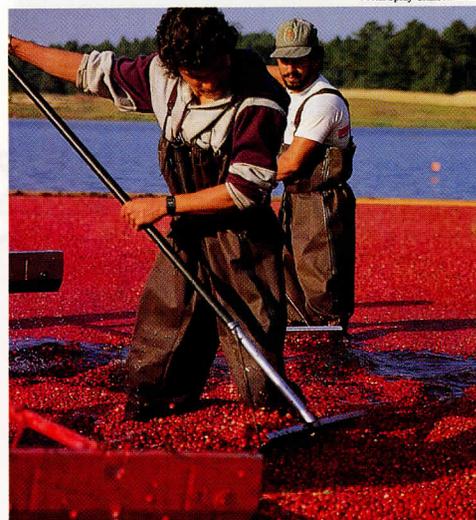
Still, at this time of year, I dearly miss our family farm and being part of the harvesttime rush. I can picture my dad and my uncle "wading through" a flood of cranberries right now (literally!), and can envision Mom about to cook up her first scrumptious cranberry-apple pie of the season. *Ummm...* I better go home this weekend!

Anyway, I was describing cranberry harvest to our publisher, Roy Reiman, the other day and he wanted to know all the details. Then he said, "That's *fascinating*. I have an idea—why don't you tell our readers that same story in our next 'Country Primer'?"

Okay. Here I am, and there they are, my parents, now bustling about in the bogs, mostly oblivious to being in the middle of some of the prettiest autumn scenery anywhere, what with millions of those ruby red berries contrasting with the colors of the blue water and gold-crested green trees.

You might find this all the more interesting if you realize that some of the cranberries at your Thanksgiving dinner may come from my family's cranberry marsh! You may also enjoy them more if you learn a bit more about how this colorful crop is grown and harvested.

First of all, cranberries are as American as apple pie—even more so, seeing as they're one of only three na-



Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc.



Cornelius Hogenbirk

tive American fruits. The other two are Concord grapes and blueberries.

Often, when my parents and I have taken visitors on tours of our cranberry farm near Warrens, Wisconsin, they're surprised to learn that cranberries don't grow on trees like cherries.

Or, since they've seen pictures of cranberries being harvested by farmers sloshing around in water above their knees, they assume that cranberries are grown underwater, like rice. That's not the case, either—that knee-deep water is only there at harvesttime, and I'll tell you why in a minute.

### Crop Grows in Bogs

First, though, cranberries grow on evergreen vines that spread a 6- to 8-in.-deep "carpet" across well-drained peat marshes called "bogs".

During the summer months, the bogs are dry, except for those times the irrigation sprinklers are turned on to water the crop or save fast-ripening berries from a freak frost.

This year, though, according to Dad, we've been blessed with perfect cranberry weather, from May when

MARGINAL NOTE: The man who believes he can do something is probably right. So is the man who believes he can't.



Virginia Disabatino

**WET WORK.** Cranberry beds are flooded at harvesttime, then a mechanical “beater” (at left) is used to knock berries off the vines under water. When berries float to surface, they are raked to elevator which loads trucks.

the buds began swelling on the vines, right through July when the buds exploded into drifts of pale pink blossoms and the bees got busy pollinating. (If you use your imagination, those blossoms resemble miniature versions of the head, neck and bill of a marsh-dwelling crane...at least that's what the Pilgrims thought when they named the fruit “crane berry”, later shortened to cranberry.)

Cranberries are perennials, and come back each spring for years and years if they're properly cared for.

Around Labor Day, the bogs assume a brilliant red hue that signals the beginning of a harvest season that continues through late fall. In the early days, when berries were hand-picked, it was such a labor-intensive task that all of a family's relatives would gather to glean the crop before winter closed in.

At the turn of the century, wooden-tined hand cranberry scoopers (my mom still displays one of these in our farm home!) speeded up the harvest considerably. A skilled, hard-working scooper could swoop up 100 lbs. of

berries in under an hour with this tool.

Then mechanical pickers (resembling a lawn mower equipped with fine-tooth combs) came on the scene,

### *“Pilgrims called them ‘crane berries’...”*

replacing the scoops. These pickers are still used in the marshes of growers who specialize in fresh-fruit cranberries, which are harvested dry.

But it was a farmer in my home state of Wisconsin who *really* speeded up cranberry harvest in the early 1920's. Noting that cranberries floated in a pan of water, he tried an experiment—he flooded his bogs, then used a rake to pull the berries off the vines. Clean as a whistle, the buoyant berries bobbed to the surface! Wind blew the berries to one side of the pond, and he easily loaded them.

That was the beginning of “wet harvesting”, and explains all those

flooded harvest pictures that lead so many people to conclude the berries are grown underwater. Water reels or “beaters” were soon invented and still used today—the machines with egg-beater-type reels whip up 2 ft. of the flood water with sufficient force to jostle the ripe berries off their vines.

That's the method my dad and Uncle Norbert (Dad's partner) use, and they're probably doing so at this very moment. If they're lucky, a brisk breeze will blow the berries down to one corner of the bed, where they're “corraled” with a string of floating boards or lightweight plastic tubing. Finally, they push the berries with hand rakes to an elevator that carries them into waiting trucks on the shore.

### **Measured in “Barrels”**

The berries are hauled to a local cranberry receiving station run by Ocean Spray (we're members of this cooperative), where our scarlet cargo is weighed and measured by the barrel. Unlike our ancestors, we no longer put our berries in wooden barrels, but we cranberry farmers still estimate our yields in barrels per acre—with each barrel equaling 100 lbs.

Nutritionally speaking, cranberries are rich in vitamin C. Plus, their waxy coating helps them “keep well”—back in the heyday of clipper ships and long whaling voyages, American vessels carried long-lasting cranberries aboard to help sailors ward off scurvy.

I'm not sure that excuse will hold water when I request second helpings of Mom's homemade cranberry nut bread at our Thanksgiving dinner. But seeing all those tart, rosy berries floating on the water each autumn and knowing they're destined for family feasts around the world, I realize how many country blessings I have to be thankful for. I sure hope some of our berries reach *your* Thanksgiving table.

MARGINAL NOTE: Withholding tax: Instead of taking it out of your hide, they hide it out of your take.