

The Press

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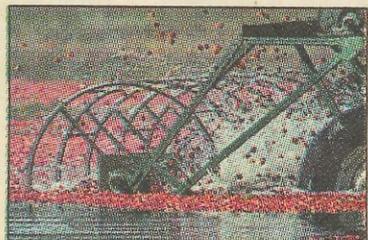
\$1.50 Toms River and north,
west of Williamstown: \$1.75

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SUNDAY

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HARVEST TIME

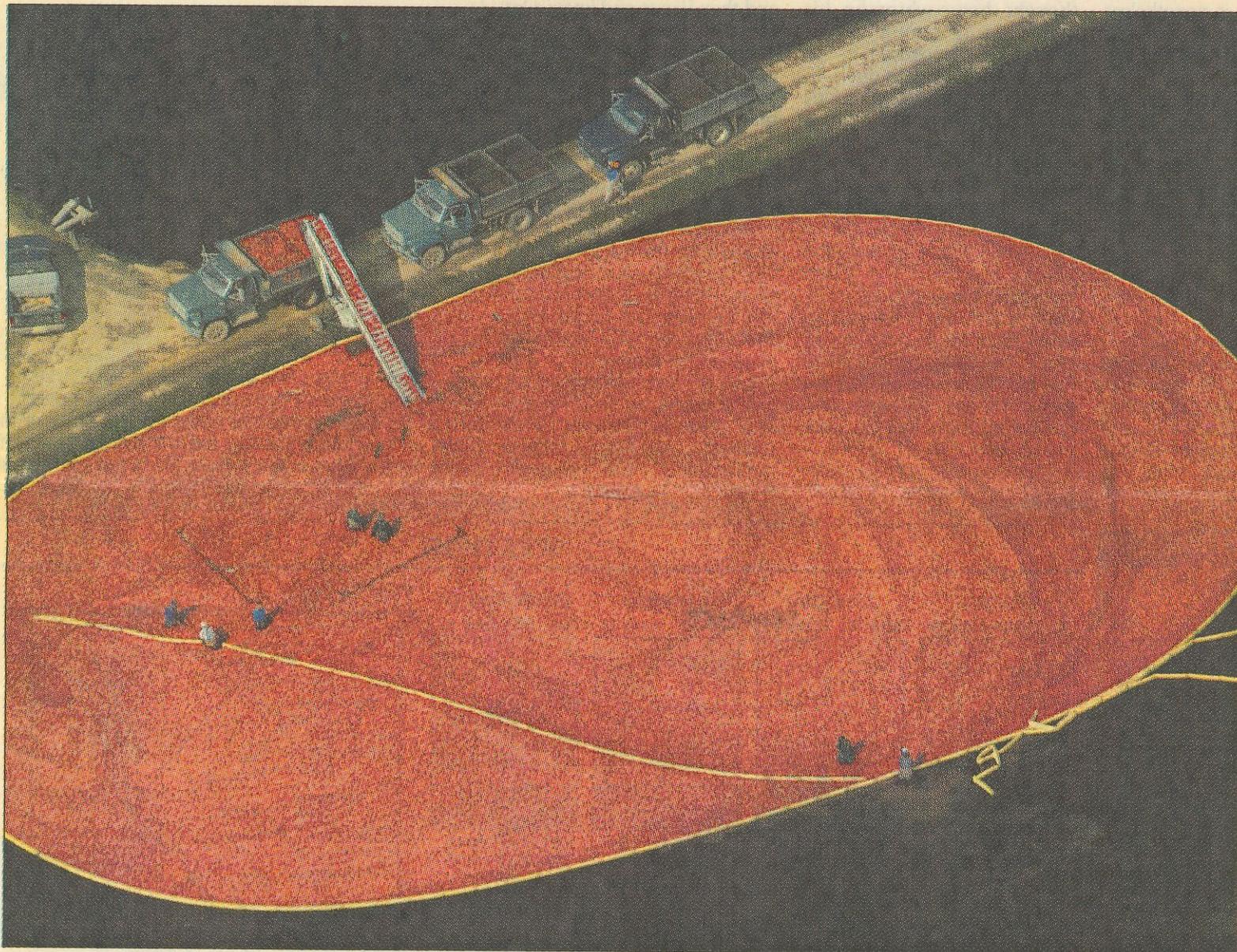


By **DEREK HARPER**
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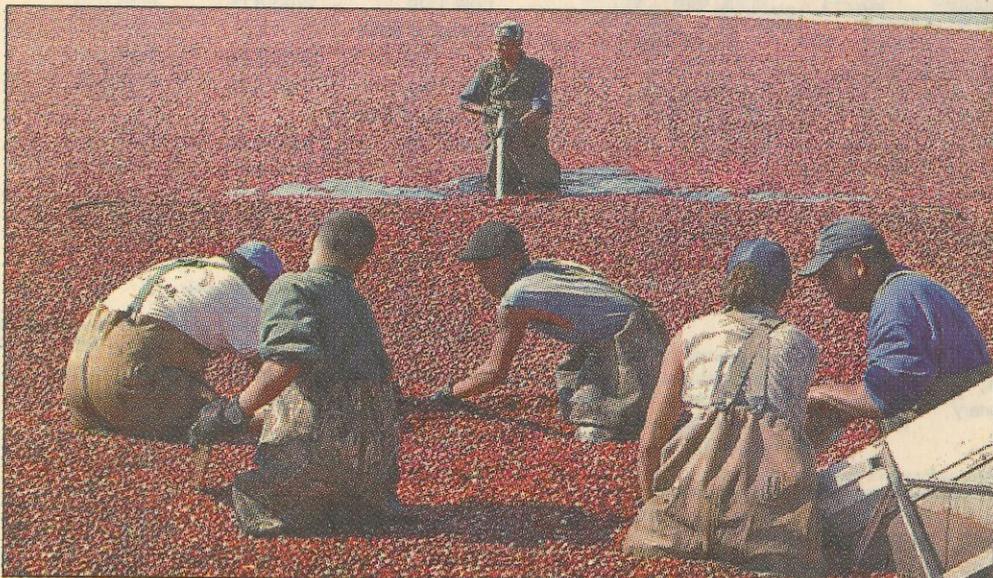
WOODLAND TOWNSHIP — The six spinning steel reels pushed by men in hip waders grow louder as they come closer to the sandy banks of the bog. In and above the mass of churning white water, tiny red berries dance and bounce, freed from their vines.

Since 1885, workers have harvested cranberries from the Haines family bogs.

The latest to run the company, William Haines Jr., president of the Pine Island Cranberry Co. Inc., stands on the bank above them. Behind him



Cranberry farmers optimistic on prospects for profitable crop



in another bog, eight men waded in deeper, browner water, gathering the bright yellow boom around the cranberries. The boom draws the berries closer to the conveyor belt that pulls them up into the back of a green, heavy-duty truck.

When the truck drives away with its load of berries, a little extra bog water spills from the back. The truck heads to the packinghouse, the first stop in the journey that will, in all likelihood, turn the load of berries into a vat of cranberry juice.

Throughout hundreds of bogs in New Jersey's Pinelands, the cranberry harvest is under way. In some places, the farmers began harvesting the red berries in the last week of September. Many will harvest through November.

The industry is still fighting its way back from the precipitous fall it took at the end of the 1990s. This year, the plants might be about average, but the prices are better, leaving farmers cautiously optimistic.

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Staff photos by Bill Gross
The cranberry harvest is about average in size this year, but is expected to bring higher prices for southern New Jersey farmers.



At the Pine Island Cranberry Co. Inc. in Chatsworth, cranberries are picked from their submersed vines with 'picking reels.'

Staff photos by Bill Gross

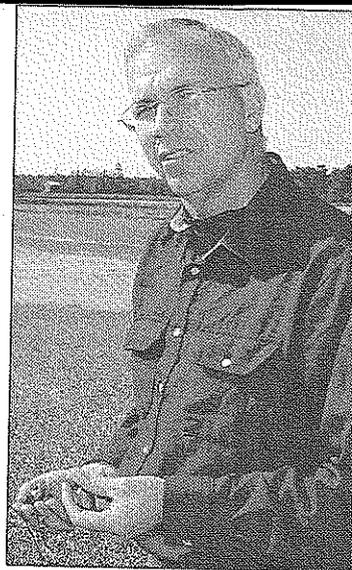
Harvest

(Continued from Page A1)

The wet summer after last year's parched weather that shocked the plants means this year's harvest will be about average, with a little lower-quality fruit than normal, said Joe Darlington, a farmer and vice chairman of the Cranberry Marketing Committee.

The state's farmers will likely harvest about 470,000 100-pound barrels, up 40,000 from a year ago, said Kim Maialetti, state Department of Agriculture representative. The farmers can expect their cranberries to fetch about \$30 a barrel, up from \$26 last year, she said.

This is very different from the crop's glory days. For two decades, cranberry growing was the most profitable farming there was in the nation. New farmers dug bogs and planted vines, while old farmers extended their holdings. When the extra cranberry plants matured in five years and their fruit



Pine Island Cranberry Co. Inc. President William Haines Jr. holds a handful of cranberries.

came to the market, the excess supply flooded the market and drove down prices.

From a 1996 high in the \$66-per-barrel range, prices plummeted to a low of about \$10 three years later, far less than what it cost to grow them. A

number of farmers, overextended on loans, simply folded, while the government ordered remaining farmers to grow less than what they could.

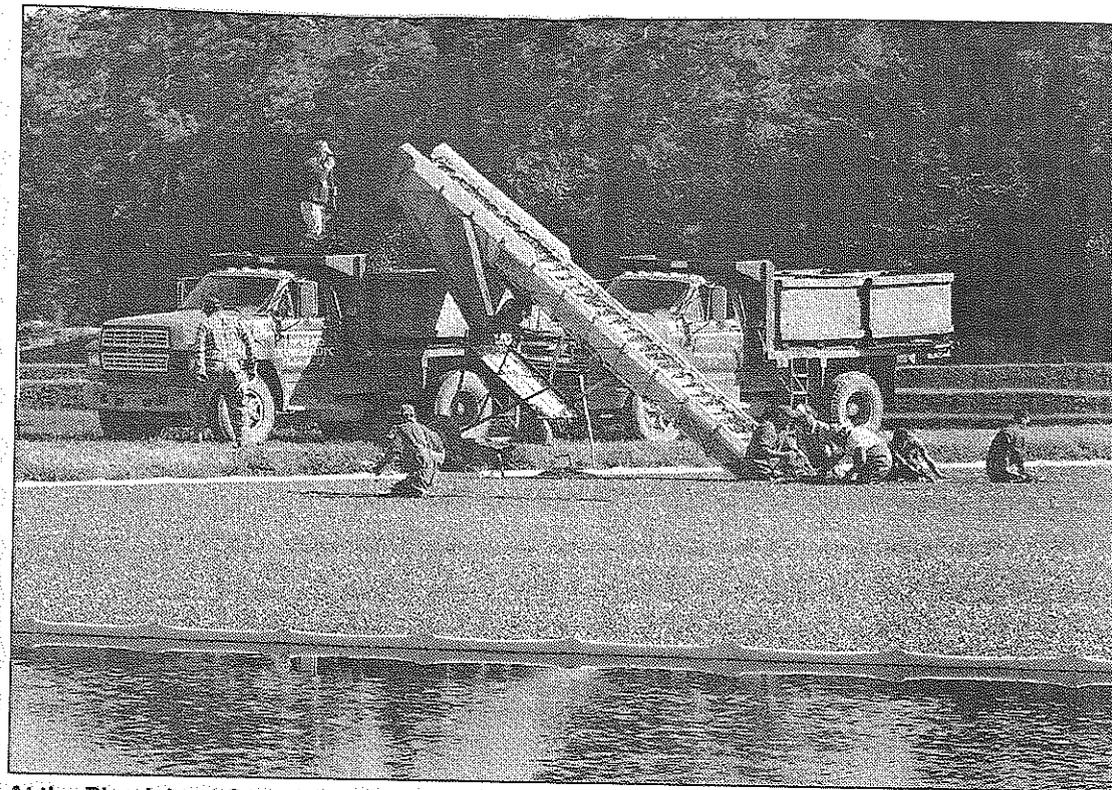
It has been a hard several years for the farm, Holly Rivera, Haines' sister, said of the family-run business. They've laid off people, tried new technologies, and sought the help of agriculturalists in hopes of pushing down the costs of production.

Other farmers haven't.

"If it takes you \$35 to \$40 to grow a crop ... that's ridiculous. You should be able to do that for \$20 a barrel," she said.

The farms and the farmers aren't in the clear just yet. But whatever happens this year or next, many think the slowly improving conditions are much better than just two years ago, when federal quotas meant the destruction of tens of thousands of berries.

"You work real hard to grow a good crop, but then you have to throw away 35 percent of it," Rivera said, shaking her head at the bad memory. "No. Nope."



At the Pine Island Cranberry Co. Inc. in Chatsworth, cranberries are pushed on to a conveyor belt and loaded into the waiting truck. The state's farmers will likely harvest about 470,000 100-pound barrels, up 40,000 from a year ago, said Kim Maialetti, state Department of Agriculture representative. The farmers can expect their cranberries to fetch about \$30 a barrel, up from \$26 last year, she said.