

# The Cranberry Bogs Of Crabmeadow

## *Lewis Farm On Water- Side Was Home To A Fresh Water Cran- berry Operation*

*by George Wallace*

Once upon a time in old Northport, before the idea that suburban living, parkways and a diversified and autonomous regional economy was to be the fate of Long Island, our area relied chiefly on agriculture and maritime enterprises for its economic health. At the harborside, shipbuilding, oystercatching and sandmining were vital industries. On the hills and in the valleys overlooking Long Island Sound, farmers raised crops and livestock.

It is difficult to picture it today, perhaps — but there are still signs. As you round the bend on Waterside Avenue, for example, headed down towards Crabmeadow Beach and the golf course. On one side of the road, you will see an old red farmhouse, with a couple of barns. On your right, you will pass a thickly wooded area, with a town sign that indicates that the area is now a nature preserve.

That wooded area was once part of the old red farmhouse's grounds, however — and was the scene of one of the more unusual agricultural enterprises to ever come to Crabmeadow and the Northport area. It turns out that, for a period of about twenty or so years in the early part of this century, a farmer by the name of Lewis converted that area — which is essentially the headwaters of Crabmeadow marsh — into a cranberry bog. Relying on the natural outflow of fresh water, the sandy soil, and the manpower of schoolchildren for the Labor Day harvest, Mr. Lewis engaged in an agricultural experiment which had transformed certain Long Island farming communities further east.

"My father came here from Switzerland in 1907," said Walton Scherer, whose dad was founder of Scherer & Sons. "He said Mr. Lewis' cranberry bogs were there when he got here."

Nowadays, if you walk a few short feet down a path into the town's preserve, all you will discover are the remains of old man Lewis' cranberry bog — a small, U-shaped pond. But it is at the site of this pond that, in the early years of this century, old man Lewis of Waterside Avenue created an agricultural enterprise which is fondly recalled to this day by some of the older members of our community.

## Ice Skates And Harvesters

There are a couple of reasons why people remember those bogs so vividly. For one thing, Mr. Lewis employed local children for the early fall harvest season, to work after school and on weekends in picking the cranberries — and those are the same people who have now grown old, and are doing the recalling. “My cousin Ella Sullivan, and friend Alice Hennessey, described their pleasure in berry picking,” wrote Suzanne M. Kilgallen in 1988, in a short paper on the subject which is in the possession of the Northport Historical Society. “And Mr. Raymond Cavanagh...has vivid memories of picking cranberries at the Lewis bog.”

But there is another reason, which has very little to do with agriculture, economics or land use patterns in the Crabmeadow region. It has to do with childhood fun.

As Ella and Alice told Ms. Kilgallen, children delighted “in ice skating upon the bog when it froze over in winter.” Added Mr. Scherer, who is 87 years old this year: “You have to flood the cranberry bogs after the harvest. So they dammed it up, from Locust Avenue all the way down to our place. That must have been 500 feet.” Mr. Scherer’s family owned some property below the bog, where his father Sigmund raised lilies, and he was one of the young boys who worked in the field during the harvest season. He remembers that the reason they flooded the bogs was simple — to keep the vines from freezing up.

The method of production goes something like this: flood the bogs all winter, and drain them about April. From April through late August, the vines are allowed to mature, flower and go to fruit. Sometime around Labor Day, it is harvest time and the berries would be picked by hand, sorted and packed, and shipped to New York City for sale. After the harvest, the bogs were once again flooded.

It was a system well-suited to the Crabmeadow marsh headlands.

Mr. Scherer recalls the technical aspects of the operation pretty clearly. The bog consisted of a series of checkerboard-type patties, he said, edged by ditches. From spring through early fall was the growing season, and fresh water from the streams up-valley from Crabmeadow would flow through the ditches, while the cranberry vines were left to grow on the dry paddies. In the wintertime, they would flood the cranberry bog completely, by damming it up downstream, and the plants would remain a couple of feet underwater until the spring.

When spring came, the process was repeated. "They would let the water out in the spring by pulling these 6 inch planks out of the dam, one at a time," said Mr. Scherer. "Take up a plank, let the water out six inches, take out another plank, and soon the bogs would be dry."

This, it seems, was the first attempt to grow cranberries in the Crabmeadow area. "Before that, it was all marshes," says Mr. Scherer. "I guess the only thing they did was, they cut salt hay for horses." To be sure, the Lewis' were not new to farming in that general vicinity. In fact, the farmhouse on Waterside is said to date back to 1780, according to the Huntington Historic Site Survey. It seems that Lewis' lived in that original, two and a half story high woodframe house for over a century, trying their hand at a variety of agricultural enterprises, before old man Lewis got the idea for creating a cranberry bog on his property.

#### Where He Got The Idea

The idea was not altogether a new one for Long Islanders. Cranberry growing got its start on Long Island in the 1860s, according to agricultural historians. A plant which is native to North America, the crane-shaped necks of the cranberry vine were brought to Long Island marshes in the Sayville-Patchogue area first, and later became a major crop in the Calverton, Manorville and Riverhead areas. The low, evergreen vines of the cranberry, which thrive best in sandy soil and require freshwater flooding, were well suited to the headlands of some of Long Island's streams. In fact, for many years Long Island was considered one of the major cranberry-growing regions in the Northeast.

Mr. Lewis' cranberry bog was a modest affair, compared to the acres and acres of bogs planted in the 1870s in locations like Manorville. Dorothy Magnani, historian for the Manorville Historical Society, relates in a Spring 1992 article in the Long Island Forum how cranberries from her area were hauled in hundred pound barrels to the Manorville Railroad Station and shipped out to the American Cranberry Exchange in New York City. As for Mr. Lewis' Crabmeadow cranberries, Ms. Kilgallen reports that some were sold locally, but that some were shipped to New York as well.

Regardless of the economic impact of the Crabmeadow cranberry bog operation, it made a profound impression on youngsters in its day. Walton Scherer still recalls harvesting old man Lewis' cranberries around the time school started. "Each of those bogs was about 25X40 feet," he remembers. "There was a small piece of wood across each ditch, and about two or three of us would cross

over into the bog and go and pick them," he remembers. "We had square wooden boxes — that was a peck — and we got 5¢ a box for them." A peck was a lot of cranberries, says Mr. Scherer — "about the size of a cedar shingle."

By that time of the year, the cranberry vines literally covered the dried out bog. "After they pulled the dam in April, the bog would dry out and the plants would grow like crazy," said Mr. Scherer. "You could walk right on 'em — the vines were like leather. I used to strip the berries off with my hand."

### Digging Up The Bog

But the years of Crabmeadow's cranberry bogs were to be short ones. As with many Long Island cranberry farms further east, it was difficult to sustain an industry that required so much cheap labor. So while the cranberry business remained a viable one for a number of years on larger farms out east, Mr. Lewis' operation had a short lifetime. "The cranberry bog was in operation for some fifteen to twenty years before 1920, and continued until around 1930 when Mr. Lewis died and his heirs sold the property," notes Ms. Kilgallen.

The land, recalls Mr. Scherer, was purchased by Rudolf Reimer, a prominent German-American — who decided to dig up the bog and create a freshwater lake at the foot of his property. Mr. Reimer, he says, brought in a crane, and ripped out most of the cranberry bogs.

But there was one little problem. "There's no bottom to that land," said Walton Scherer. "It's a sink hole. You dig it up, and the water and mud and sand fills right in behind you. I remember a whole team of horses fell into that marsh once, when they went in to cut the grass, and the whole team went down. Reimer was going to make a big lake there, but he couldn't do it."

Today, the Lewis farmhouse is owned by descendants of the White family, which eventually purchased it. As for the former cranberry bogs, Ms. Kilgallen says you can see the outline of some of them in the town's nature preserve. That lake Mr. Reimer tried to dig out? It lies on the boundary of the town's property and that of Dr. Fuchs.

But at least there is this. Farmer Lewis' Crabmeadow cranberry bog has not gone the way of much of the rest of the area's agricultural lands, and been subdivided and turned into plots for suburban homes. These days, it has turned into a quiet woodland park, with a pondside path on which joggers and strollers may get their exercise. "We Northport residents are fortunate that the land remains undeveloped, and the Lewis homestead still stands," writes

Suzanne M. Kilgallen, "to remind us of this agricultural period (in Northport's history.)"