

Cranberry Picking

by Jan Kelly

I had a question asked of me which I thought peculiar at first, but if I put myself into the thinking and experience of the questioner, it made sense, "Which cranberries are the good ones?" I didn't know whether the person meant *Ocean Spray* or even canned cranberries. What caused this observant mid-Westerner's confusion was the hog cranberries. We who live here and pick cranberries never think of the hog cranberries and if we did, confusion wouldn't result anyway.

Hog cranberry is a wild ground cover which does resemble the edible cranberry. But the hog cranberry grows where it is high and dry and clings to the ground. Deer, mice, foxes, raccoons and other local fauna eat these berries for nourishment and for fuel. Like bayberries, they are waxy and provide a warming to the body temperature of these animals. The name "hog" could come from the fact that animals eat them or it could come from the fact that this vine covers the hills of Truro, many of which resemble over-sized backs of hogs. These hills are referred to as hogback hills. This plant is of the *Uva Ursi* family and the leaves can be brewed in water, the liquid being drunk as a diuretic. But the berries, no; leave them for wilder folk.

The edible cranberry, which most people are more familiar with is of the *Vaccinium* genus, an evergreen. It is called "cranberry" because the blossom resembles the head of a crane. It grows low in bogs and is flooded by rains or seepage. Commercial bogs are deliberately flooded during growth and after picking. The last flooding is because the berries float and can be collected easily. Then sand is laid down to cover the bog, to insulate it and to control its growth. That's the way commercial bogs are operated, but we in Provincetown pick the wild berries which only nature controls. The bogs we pick in were all cultivated and privately owned at one time. The berries were picked with wooden scoops with wooden tines in the last century. The twentieth century brought metal tines to the scoops. Whole families would spend the hazy autumn afternoons scooping the crimson berries in tandem filling the wooden barrels to be shipped to Boston. All the while the younger ones were warned, "No berries on the ground." The work went on all the daylight hours in which the weather cooperated until the bogs were picked clean. Then the frost would quickly follow—only pine cones to harvest for Xmas wreaths after that.

This year is a bumper year. We deserve it; last year there were none. Friday was a glorious day, but the weather report threatened a restless evening of wind and passing fronts and rain—a possible frost, even. So Taffy Silva, my next-door neighbor laid down his paint brush and cautioned that this might be our last day for cranberries. Okay, I cancelled tennis, got out my gear and joined the picking crew. Brother Anthony and Lil Howard arrived. Anthony Silva who is about three meals and a night's sleep from 80 years old warn-



Edmund and Anthony Silva, veteran berry pickers

ed me heavily of the long walk, the strenuous ordeal of picking and carting that burdensome load. Anthony is very competitive and doesn't like to be outdone in anything. He wears a tie everywhere, everyday. He wore a tie to the bogs. He arrived first at the bogs and picked the longest. Taffy wondered if it wouldn't be easier for me by bicycle. Lil Howard who has picked more berries than there are raindrops, just smiled at me—"Men!" Well, we all set off to pick from Bert Young's bog. Lil picks by hand. Anthony uses a family hand scoop with metal tines. Taffy uses a long-handled scoop which saves the back. Both these scoops have been used by the Silva Family for the whole of the 20th century to date. The Silva Family owned and operated bogs out at New Beach and the brothers have picked in these bogs each autumn of their lives, Anthony with a tie. The Silva Family bought the bogs from Phoebe Atkins. All the bogs were privately owned. Lysander Paine owned bogs stretching to Race Point. The berries were carted to the lot across from his house at 96 Commercial Street for cleaning and sorting. Windy days were preferable so that the chaff would fly. Tom Powell owned a fish market as well as bogs. You can see a painting of him in Town Hall—the man cleaning fish by Hawthorne is Tom Powell. Charlie Foster owned bogs to the east'ard. So when you are out picking cranberries you may be in the bog of Martin Silva, Lysander Paine, Tom Powell, Charlie Foster or Bert Young. They'd all be happy to know their bogs are still being picked and enjoyed. They don't need the profit anymore.

But we do. Lil Howard had two five gallon buckets, balancing her jaunty walk. Taffy use one of my knapsacks. Anthony carried a bag a Sumo wrestler would struggle with atop his head. A curious picture this quartet of berry pickers, the long lines of the October sun at their backs silhouetting them in the autumnal colors. Bounty of the woods, a winter's worth of eating, some set aside for making wine and liqueur, gifts for the neighbors and some to be shipped to friends not so lucky to live walking distance to a bog. Once a necessity to stave off scurvy for the whalers and clippers, now cranberries are a luxury and a favored food of all. Breads, pies, jams, drinks and just plain sauce are all so delicious—but the picking is the best part.