Volume I, No. 2 **Living History** Summer 1991

TOMATO MANIA

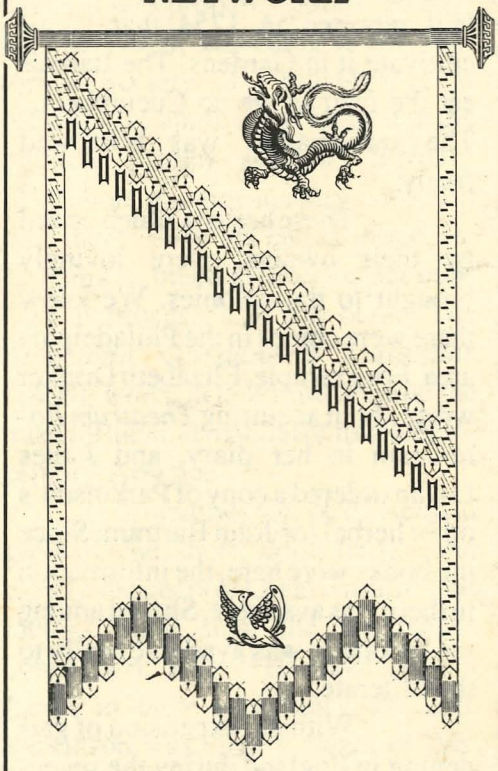
When you harvest fresh tomatoes from your garden this year, imagine next summer's gardening as part of a fascinating experiment. Recruit your friends, children, relatives and neighbors to help you enjoy eating and evaluating a tomato harvest like you've never had before. We will help you get the facts and the seeds in preparation for planting heritage and contemporary varieties of tomatoes. You'll learn about various types of tomatoes grown then and now; you'll love the comparison. Get ready for salads, sauces and other dishes that provoke conversation at the dinner table.

Heritage tomato varieties are notably different from their contemporary cousins. Naturally, old and new tomato varieties are similar in appearance, but there are differences in yield, timing of the yield, flavor and texture. An article in our winter issue about heritage and contemporary tomato varieties by Bob Becker, Assistant Professor of Horticultural Sciences at Cornell University, will give you the inspiration and direction you'll need at the exactly when you'll be thinking about your next year's garden.

In this issue, Clarissa Dillon, explodes the myth that tomatoes were uncommon in colonial home gardens because they were believed to be poisonous. Dillon says that whenever she has proposed the introduction of tomatoes into colonial/18th century kitchen gardens in southeastern Pennsylvania, she has encountered this popular misconception. That is why she enjoys writing about this subject.

Our writer reports that Charlie Thomford, gardener at Pennsbury Manor, the reconstructed country estate of William Penn in Morrisville, PA, has planted tomatoes in the ornamental or pleasure garden there for several years. There is no documentation that Penn had them in his gardens; Charlie feels that they should not, therefore, be in the kitchen garden. Dillon notes that the town of Salem, New Jersey has a tomato festival each summer to commemorate the public consumption of tomatoes. It is believed that Robert Gibbon Johnson "proved" they were edible. This 1820 event is not conclusively documented, according to Dillon, and the event may be based on yet another popular myth.

WHAT IT MEANS TO JOIN THE LIVING HISTORY NETWORK



Readers of this publication are part of a living history movement that has grown significantly in recent years. Living history promotes hands-on learning about the past. When something is concrete, it stimulates us to go deeper into a subject. Active participants in historical reenactments know this only too well. It's a perspective that avoids a passive relationship to the past. A living historical approach involves adapting traditional methods to contemporary problems. It could mean organizing a living history project as complicated as a living history farm (see story on page 4) or as easy as a corn celebration (see story of page 6).

Participation in living history activities could include visiting or volunteering at a living history farm or facility near your home. Or choosing a specific time period about which you read widely, attend lectures, workshops and specialized courses and then apply that knowledge and special perspective in some way to the contemporary scene. Some people plant heritage seeds for the

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EXPLODING A HISTORICAL MYTH ABOUT TOMATOES

For years people have believed with varying degrees that the colonists did not grow or eat tomatoes [*Lycopersicon esculentum*], which they "believed to be poisonous." Looking into primary sources, we find something very different.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century herbals were used in several ways: as plant identification guides, botanical references, and for culinary and medicinal plant uses. Tomatoes, or love apples, were known to be edible, according to reputable sources of the period. John Gerard, in *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* [1597, revised 1633] said they were eaten raw and cooked. He never mentioned any poisonous aspect, but did complain that "the whole Plant is of a ranke and stinking savour." John Parkinson produced two massive herbals: *Paradisus in Sole Paradisus Terrestris* [1629] and *Theatrum Botanicum* [1640]. Both presented tomatoes as edible and the latter provided much detail about cooking them.

Knowledge about tomatoes continued appearing in the eighteenth-century herbals. William Salmon's *Botanologia* [1710] spoke of seeing tomatoes growing wild in the Carolinas; in England they were only found in gardens. In hot countries, he said, tomatoes were eaten raw with oil, vinegar, and pepper "for Sawce to their Meat, as we do here only to please and cool or quench the Heat and Thirst of hot Stomachs." They were also boiled in vinegar with salt and pepper, then served with oil and lemon juice.

In 1737, in *A Curious Herbal,* Elizabeth Blackwell wrote, "In Italy they eat them with Oil and Vinegar as we do Cucumbers." *The Useful Family Herbal* by Sir John Hill reported in 1754 that "...we cultivate it in Gardens. The Italians eat the fruit as we do Cucumbers." The information was borrowed freely.

These herbals, much prized by their owners, were lovingly brought to the colonies. We know there were copies in the Philadelphia area. For example, Elizabeth Drinker wrote about acquiring *Theatrum Botanicum* in her diary, and James Logan ordered a copy of Parkinson's other herbal for John Bartram. Since the books were here, the information in them was available. Shared among the literate, it was available orally to the illiterate.

With the expansion of gardening in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came manuals and guides which set forth new designs, methods, and plant information. These early volumes not only dealt with ornamental spaces used for aesthetic and social purposes, but they also included kitchen garden and plant information.

The best-known and most-used English gardening books of the eighteenth century were by Philip Miller. His *Gardener's Dictionary* and *Gardener's Kalendar* were revised, enlarged, and reprinted throughout the century. Benjamin Franklin owned the latter and also imported copies that he advertised for sale. John Bartram had a copy that had been recommended to him by his English patron, Peter Collinson. Both of Miller's books, which influenced not only his contemporaries but also later authors, tell us tomatoes were "much used" to flavor soups.

Other books of this kind cover very much the same materials, often similarly organized. Thomas Mawe, another influential gardening author, listed tomatoes as kitchen garden plants in *Every Man His Own Gardener* [1776], saying they were "employed as an esculent and ornamental plant." He and John Abercrombie also spoke of their use in soups in *A Gardener's and Botanist's Dictionary* [1797].

These gardening books confirm that tomatoes were being grown in kitchen gardens, something established as early as 1615 in Gervase Markham's *The English Housewife*. Their medicinal uses, provided in the herbals, had become de-emphasized, but not the culinary. The tomato was not solely an ornamental garden plant as some today claim; it remained firmly rooted in the kitchen garden because of its culinary uses.

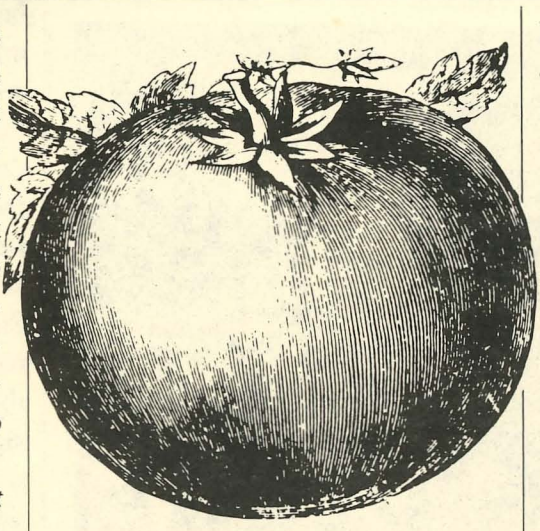
Martha Bradley's *The British Housewife* [1770?] directed that tomatoes should be harvested in summer; they were "very well deserving to be brought into universal Prac-

tice" and she reported that they were being sold in markets. She informed her readers, "It is the Fruit of a Plant of the Nightshade Kind, but is perfectly Wholesome. Soups are made very agreeable by this...Some eat them alone, but they are best in soup to which they give an agreeable Flavour." Clearly she had grown tomatoes for culinary use and encouraged other English housewives to do the same.

Hannah Glasse, in *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* [1796], recommended tomatoes in a Spanish fish dish. Another published cookbook, *Culina,* undated but stylistically late eighteenth-century, was written by someone with the pen-name Ignotus. It provided three recipes using tomatoes: two for sauces cooked down, strained, and spiced and one for potted tomatoes to be used in soups or with roasted meats.

There is a little book of miscellaneous memoranda in the Delaware County [Pennsylvania] Historical Society. It was begun in 1715 by a Peter Dicks of Chester County. In it I found an undated entry, "A receipt to pickle Tomattoes" and four pages later, in a different handwriting, there is "To make Tomatoes Catsup." So, tomatoes were valued here in at least one family and in other families as well. Bartram's friend, Collinson, had written in 1742 that "Apples of Love are very much used in Italy to put when ripe into broths and soup giving it a pretty tart taste...They call it Tamiata." In 1765, John Bartram, while on a journey to Florida, recorded that a sharp frost had killed the pumpkin vines and the leaves of the Carolina peas "but did not hurt ye tomatis."

In South Carolina, Harriet



Pinckney Horry began a receipt book following her marriage in 1770. She included directions "To Keep Tomatoos for Winter Use." In Virginia, Thomas Jefferson was growing tomatoes in 1781 and recorded in 1809 that they were both cooked and eaten. Both were travelers and letter-writers.

A nurseryman in Philadelphia named John Lithen published a broadside catalogue. Although undated, it was probably published during the 1790s, according to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It offered love apple seeds for sale in the kitchen garden section. Bernard M'Mahon, another nurseryman, also sold them. They are called tomatoes, "...being in much estimation for culinary purposes..." in his book, *The American Gardener's Calendar* [1806], which at that time became the most influential manual of nineteenth-century America.

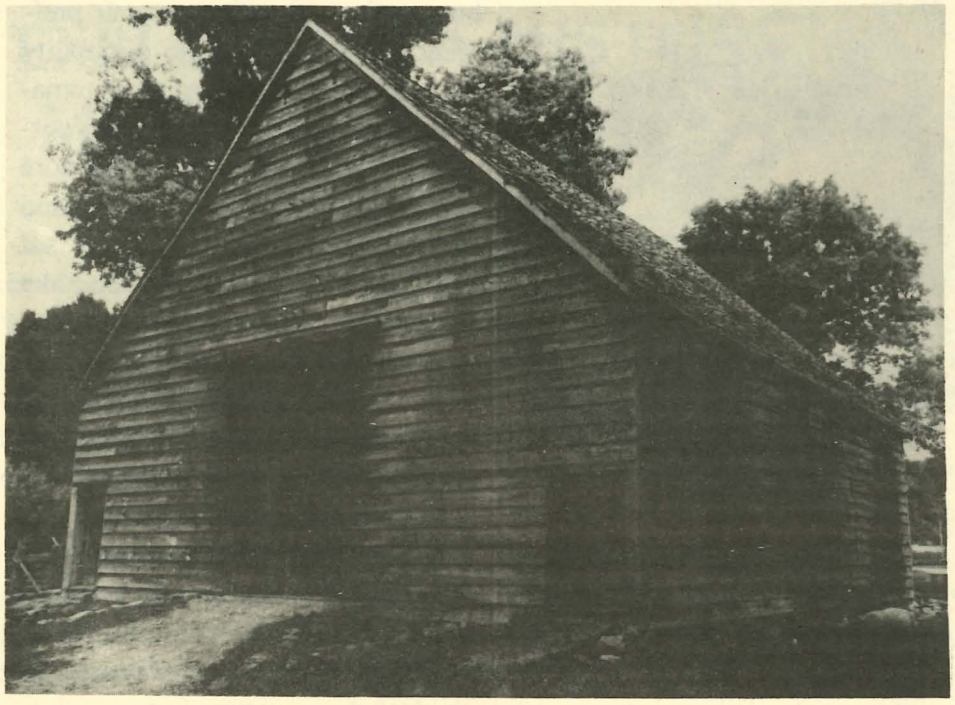
Tomatoes can be difficult to grow in the short, cool, damp, and cloudy summers of Great Britain. This factor, rather than the nightshade connection, may well have been a factor in their acceptance as food. Parkinson was clearly aware of this. Early starting in a hot-bed or greenhouse was recommended; this would limit their cultivation in ordinary English kitchen gardens. It might have been a class or socioeconomic preference. There is also the possibility that the growing and eating of tomatoes was a question of cultural or personal/family preference. Much more investigation into family gardens and food preferences is necessary. In that way, more can be learned about the segment of the population that was growing and eating various plants.

Perhaps, as people today become aware of what has been written about love apples in the past, the myth will no longer be perpetuated. It is now impossible to obtain true 18th-century seeds because too much time has elapsed. Perennials, especially weeds, come closer than annuals to their ancestors, but modifications always occur in an outdoor environment. The "heirloom seeds" that are becoming available today, are for the most part, mid-19th century seeds collected from farmers and gardeners and then verified in period nursery catalogues. Landis Valley Farm Museum in Lancaster, Pa. distributes old tomato seeds and can provide instructions for seed saving. The best we can hope for today for pre-1830 gardens is to purchase heirloom seeds when possible and then save seeds each year for the following season.

Wouldn't it be exciting if more colonial historical sites began growing tomatoes in their kitchen gardens? Research makes it abundantly clear that well before 1820, they did too eat tomatoes.

Clarissa F. Dillon, Ph.D

Clarissa Dillon's doctoral dissertation at Bryn Mawr College in 1986 discussed kitchen gardens, plants and their uses as well as women's work in 18th century southeastern Pennsylvania. She has been a gardener and consultant for various historic sites in the Philadelphia area. She also demonstrates and interprets the varied skills of colonial housewifery.



HOLDING THE LINE ON DUTCH BARNS:

One in New York operates as a living history demonstration

The New World Dutch barn is an endangered architecture. In the 17th and 18th centuries this barn type characterized the farms and rural landscape of New York and northern New Jersey where Dutch colonists established their culture and language. Today only a few hundred examples remain. Many are in a bad state of repair.

Dutch barns are rapidly disappearing because of fires, abandonment and deterioration, the sale and removal of historic barns for the construction of contemporary buildings and the outright demolition of barns due to obsolescence or new development. If the present trend continues unchecked, few will survive the next 20 years. If we don't study and document them before they are moved, converted or left to rot, we will lose the opportunity we have to gain a better historic perspective on the Dutch barn and the way of life it represents.

The Dutch barn is an aisle barn unlike English or German barns, which have their wagon entrance on the side. One enters the Dutch barn on the gable end. Inside, the barn is much like the design of a church with a broad center nave and two narrow side aisles. Grain and especially wheat were the principal cash crop of the 18th century farm. It was thrashed and winnowed on a raised wooden floor in the center of the barn. Massive anchorbeams up to 30 feet long span the width of the threshing floor. About 12 feet above the floor, closely spaced mow poles made of tree saplings rest on the anchorbeams, on which the sheaves of grain were stored during the winter.

With a little experience, Dutch barns can be easily distinguished in the landscape by their box-like shape, low side walls, and broad steeply pitched roofs. A Dutch barn in a somewhat unaltered state has wide unpainted horizontal clapboard siding and wagon doors opening into the barn. Doors with wooden hinges are noteworthy. The large wagon doors were made of three or four sections that fasten shut to a removable center post. Many barns have been modified with additions, silos, new roof lines, and new siding material. Inside, the free-standing columns and their massive anchorbeams with rounded tenons extend a foot beyond the back of the column and are a sure sign of a Dutch barn.

In 1969, Syracuse University published John Fitchen's study, *The New World Dutch Barn.* This work established the unique Dutch architecture for future researchers. Fitchen was an architectural scholar who had studied the English Gothic cathedral and was familiar with European timber framing. He examined and documented 75 Dutch barns in New York and New Jersey. His book remains the best on the subject.

Fitchen's book sparked considerable interest in the Dutch barn. A small group of people formed the Dutch Barn Preservation Society in 1985 in upstate New York to expand the study of Dutch barns. Hundreds of Dutch barns in New York and New Jersey have been documented and recorded as a result. Private owners of Dutch barns and groups concerned with preserving local history have responded to the increased public awareness and as a result, several important barns were saved from demolition.

Contemporary uses for Dutch barns are emerging. Presently, more than a dozen are open to the public. Adair Vineyards in New Paltz, New York, encourages visitors. The commercial concern has converted an 18th century Dutch barn on its Hudson Valley farm into a winery and tasting area. A cement floor replaces the central wooden thresh-

ing floor and the dirt floors of the side aisles. A wooden floor was added above the anchorbeams where mow poles once held sheaves of grain, but careful remodeling has left the main internal framework exposed. A good sense of the structure's proportions is still evident.

Of nine Dutch barns preserved as museums in New York and New Jersey, only three occupy their original setting. The other six were taken apart, moved to a new location, and reconstructed. This is an expensive process, but it has often saved a barn slated for demolition. Dutch barns can serve varied purposes. The Windfall Dutch barn is a restored barn in Salt Springville, New York (north of Cooperstown) that serves as a busy community center for the rural population there. After a philanthropist purchased some land for wildlife preservation, one of the dilapidated barns on the land revealed the valuable beams of a Dutch barn. Trustee Wilhemus Dill says that through the help of experts and a group of young people willing to learn how to rebuild it, the barn was restored to its original state. In 1976, the barn and a restored Victorian house were handed over to a board of trustees who presently manage it. It is open from June 1 to Labor Day; concerts, meetings, dances wedding receptions, quilt shows and other exhibits are part of a full entertainment season.

Some Dutch barns house collections of local agricultural tools.These include the Wortendyke barn in Bergen County, New Jersey and the Bronck barn in Greene County, New York.

Only one Dutch barn functions as a museum that interprets its historic use as part of a living history farm. The Philipsburg Manor in Tarrytown, New York is among

Interior of Dutch barn at living history farm, Philipsburg Manor.

the first living history farm undertakings in America. At Philipsburg, a visitor can learn about the Dutch barn as it functioned on a working farm more than 200 years ago. In the reconstructed setting of 1720 to 1750, the staff dresses in the costume of the period.They work a water-powered grist mill and cultivate the small farm's acreage. Early breeds of cattle, sheep and chickens plus a garden of heritage herbs and vegetables are maintained and explained to visitors.

Philipsburg Manor was founded as a living history farm in 1940 with the interest and money of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Today it is part of Historic Hudson Valley, a nonprofit operation responsible for six major historic sites in the Hudson Valley. The site at Philipsburg is the result of many years of historic and archaelogical study. The Dutch barn presently on the site was moved 125 miles to Tarrytown in 1981 from Albany County where it replaced an earlier barn that burned; the former barn was moved there in 1947 from Hurley, New York.

The New World Dutch barn developed in the early 1600s and has remained somewhat unchanged for 200 years. Even after new styles and ideas of barn architecture altered and finally replaced the classic Dutch style in the Northeast. The Dutch influence remained in the 19th century barns. The continued use of horizontal siding on barns in old Dutch communities is the most apparent vestige.

Few surviving Dutch barns have not undergone later modifications to accommodate changes in agriculture, especially changes from grain to dairy farming. Little remains in the historic record to help us understand exactly how the Dutch barns functioned as part of working farms. To understand this, we must document and support the necessary historic archaeology before what remains is gone. We must record the knowledge of the few traditional farmers who are left and see how they used the barns. Finally, we must establish living history farms where we can recreate and demonstrate early farming.

The living history farm at Philipsburg Manor is both fascinating and educational. It is the best interpretation of an 18th century working barn to date. However, it lacks an authenticity of place by being a reconstruction of an Albany County barn. The design of the side aisles is not totally convincing. There remains a great deal of conjecture on the early design of stalls and mangers because there is so little remaining evidence. Hopefully in the future more examples of Dutch barns will be saved on the land where they were built and more of their original condition will be maintained.

Peter Sinclair

THE CORN REPORT:

Is there a corn festival in your future?

Hudson Valley heritage corn raised by the Wolven family for generations was an excellent fund-raiser for the repair of old world Dutch barns . People wanted to stay in touch, report on their progress, and discover the many ways in which they are part of living history activities. "The Corn Report" serves this purpose.

A more complete article on the experiences of those folks who planted the heritage corn will be in our fall and winter issues. This issue includes an introduction to corn celebrations. Consider the possibility of organizing one for your community organization.

Watch for updates of "The Corn Report" in upcoming issues!

CANADIAN CORN FESTIVAL

As we approach the harvest time of the year when so many of Ontario's fruits and vegetables are ready to be picked, the harvest of sweet corn or "corn on the cob" is eagerly anticipated. Sweet corn is one of the few crops widely grown today in North America that is native to the continent. Corn cultivation has a history of cultivation for at least 3500 years in the Americas.

There are five different kinds of corn: pop, flint, dent, flour and sweet. Genetically, sweet corn can be differentiated from field corn by a single recessive gene which prevents some sugars from converting into starch. The Iroquois people cultivated at least two sweet varieties and the Indians of the upper Missouri were known to have cultivated four.

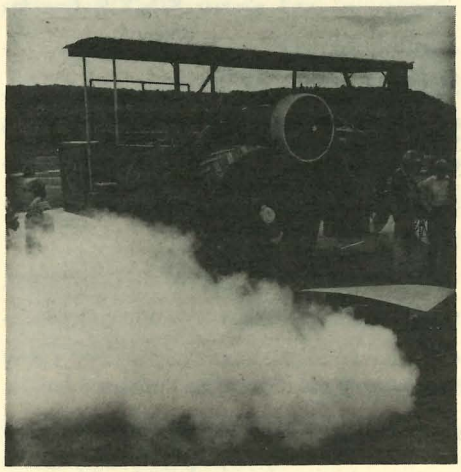
In Ontario, corn was one of the first crops planted by the pioneers for it could be sown in the stumpy fields and it helped break up the soil. Except in the most south-westerly parts of the province, corn could not be consistently relied upon to

mature; therefore it was not widely grown. Of the corn varieties grown in the 19th century, most was field corn, but some sweet corn was also raised for home consumption.

Popular early varieties of sweet corn included Stowell's Evergreen, Minnesota and Egyptian. Nineteenth century cookbooks often contain recipes for corn, with two of the most popular being for boiled corn and corn oysters. According to the latter recipe you grate the corn, then mix it with eggs, milk, baking powder and flour to form a batter. Then it is fried by spoonfuls in hot butter.

Interest in plant breeding genetics in this century led to the development of many new hybrid corn varieties. Corn has been bred to develop various qualities, including yield, uniformity and resistance to bacterial wilt, while others are considered appropriate for the fresh market because of taste and appearance.

We hope you'll join us at the Ontario Agricultural Museum on August 18 in Milton, Ontario for our corn celebration. The highlight of this special event is our own special corn on the cob steamed in the husk using a 1920s steam engine. We draw steam off the boiler and pipe it by rubber hose to one or two maple syrup kettles. The hose is placed through an appropriately sized hole cut in three-quarters inch plywood kettle covers, ensuring that it is positioned in the bottom. Corn is loaded into the kettle almost to the top and the cover is replaced. We make sure to weigh down the cover as the back pressure on the hose could kick it right out of the kettle. Corn is steamed for 25 minutes and tasted for "doneness." The first pot takes the longest as the kettle is cold.



At the festival we invite the Ontario Corn Producers' Association to set up a booth where they exhibit many items made of corn, including biodegradable bags. A popcorn company representative is usually on hand. Square dancing enhances the entertainment value of the festivities. Even though the event is a labor-intensive undertaking and the butter and paper products are expensive, but it can be a real team-building opportunity for your organization.

Although we don't attempt to make a profit, it would be easy for any group to do so. We need 300 to 350 ears of corn and can get it around the corner for $1.25 a dozen. If you're thinking of holding a corn festival, consider stocking up on butter, salt, pepper, mounds of serviettes and paper plates. And get ready for the unexpected. Garbage containers must be emptied frequently. Wasps are corn on the cob lovers too!

Lynn Campbell
and Susan Bennett
Ontario Agricultural Museum

For more information about the annual corn fest at the Ontario Agricultural Museum, write to the museum staff at P.O. Box 38, Milton, Ontario, Canada L9T 2Y3, or call (416) 878-8151.

TWO MORE EXAMPLES OF CORN COMMUNITY FESTIVALS

The Beacon Sloop Club's "Corn Festival" on August 11, 1991 is the 12th year this "food orgy" on the Hudson River has been a successful fund-raiser. The group supports living history projects and is involved in drawing attention to environmental issues. The corn festival highlights crafts, food, environmental exhibits and live music, all day.

Beacon Sloop Club members say they promote living history by sponsoring festivals similar to Native American harvest celebrations of the past. The Beacon Sloop Club is also a support group for Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, Inc., a non-profit organization, which operates a 106-ft. historical replica of a sloop, a common transport vessel on the Hudson until well after the Civil War. The replica is used for environmental education programs that serve over 10,000 students annually in the river valley.

The corn festival will be held at the old ferry dock in Beacon, N.Y., not far from the railroad station where there is a noteworthy view of the river. At the event, sloop club members expect to sell 1100 ears of corn, in addition to hot dogs, chili, watermelon, lemonade and ice cream. About 50 sloop club members volunteer to serve on committees which break the work down into smaller units. They buy the corn, cook and husk it, prepare other foods for sale, set-up tables, clean-up, entertain, and publicize the event. Outside vendors provide crafts booths. Activist groups take charge of environmental exhibits. Amateur and

Continued on next page

CORN REPORT CONTINUED

professional musicians volunteer time to provide entertainment.

The corn festival doesn't attract as many people as the other celebrations sponsored by the sloop club. Festivals featuring pumpkins, shad and strawberries are a larger draw, although the corn festival continues to appeal to over 500 people each year. The Beacon Sloop Club raises between $1,000 and $1,500 with the event. For more information, call Phyllis Newham at (914) 831-6962.

* * *

An even more financially successful corn festival is the one sponsored by the Hurley Heritage Society in Hurley, New York. The event celebrates the agriculture and contemporary and historical importance of corn in this Hudson River Valley community. The money raised supports the heritage society's small museum and it subsidizes lectures and other programs of historical significance for the group during the year. The corn festival in Hurley this year will be held on Saturday, August 17 on the grounds of the Dutch Reformed Church on Main Street in Hurley from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is $1. This is the 11th year for the festival. About 2500 people are expected to attend.

Over 80 crafts vendors will sell their wares. Steamed corn on the cob picked that morning at a local farm will be on sale. Homemade corn chowder and corn muffins are a speciality at the event. Conventional luncheon items can be purchased. Colonial crafts demonstrations will feature blacksmithing, coopering and spinning. Last year the historical society raised about $9,000 for its annual programs. After the conclusion of each year's corn festival, planning begins for the next year's event. The responsibility of organizing the corn festival falls to volunteers.

For more information, contact the Hurley Historical Society, P.O. Box 1661, Hurley, New York 12443.

WHAT IT MEANS TO JOIN THE LIVING HISTORY NETWORK

(Continued from Page 1)

pleasure and relaxation associated with gardening; then they share what they've learned with friends and family members. Heritage vegetable and flower plants can be compared to similar varieties that are commercially available today.

In a fast-moving society, we sometimes forget where we came from and the social/cultural significance of our family's past. There are many ways of addressing this. For some, genealogy research is appropriate or membership in an ethnic or cultural association. Genealogy research often goes much further than the construction of a family tree. Once you're hooked on genealogy research, it isn't long before you're delving into the social and political climate of the times during which your ancestors lived. The process provokes insights into family characteristics and interests.

The above examples touch on many different aspects of living history. This publication covers the living history movement and a network of people on the grassroots level who engage in activities that make history come alive. There are living history advocates in places where you'd least expect to find them. If you're reading this publication, chances are that you're going to find things to do, places to go, and useful ideas on how to join forces with others like yourself who are creating and supporting living history themes, events and special activities.

EEL STEW:

Part Two

A Conversation with Hank Vedder Recorded on audiotape, August 1990, in Saugerties, N.Y. by Greg Huber, Karin Parton, and Peter Sinclair. Comments by P.S.

Greg arranged with Hank's neighbor, Harry Winnie, to meet Hank one day in late summer of last year and we all drove up to Saugerties together. While sitting in Hank's kitchen we recorded a three hour conversation filled with Hank's knowledge and experience. He's a man who is as native to this part of the Hudson Valley as an old shaggy tree growing on a craggy Catskill mountain side. Hank has done farm work and still maintains a small vegetable garden. He has hunted and trapped in the woodlands that surround him, but fishing is Hank's favorite.

"We came up here to talk with you because we heard that you make eel stew," Greg said to Hank, referring to the American eel (*Angilla rostratus*).

"I don't," Hank replied a little indignantly, pointing to a photograph of a neighbor on the wall. "You see that picture right there? She's the one that makes it [eel stew] and she can really make it too. I don't care what anyone says. It is good. Where I was born, I don't think it's a hundred feet apart from her. She was up on a little hill and I was down there in a hollow. That's where I was born."

"What's her name?" Karen asked.

"Mary Mowers," he told her.

Greg immediately wanted to get to the subject of why we were there.

Hank Vedder (left) with his friend and neighbor Harry Winnie (right) in front of Hank's house. Photo: PS

"How do you fish for eel?" he asked Hank.

"First thing is, I try to catch bait fish," he said. "I catch some sun fish, take my knife, and cut nice little strips off. Put them on for bait. That's all I ever fish with, hook-and-line." And then he added with a sense of pride, "I've never used a fly and whenever I come back, I've got trout."

"You use a pole?" Greg asked, but he was really probing Hank's fishing style.

Hank nodded "yes" and added, "All my good poles got burned up in the fire [a recent wood stove fire which burned the roof off his house] so I made one. I didn't think it would be any good but it's caught a lot of fish. It's had 68 trout so far."

Greg wanted to know how many eels Hank had caught by the summer when we recorded this interview.

"I guess I've had about eight eel, that's all. I go out and don't stay late. They won't bite 'till it gets dark. Last night was a wonderful night— no mosquitoes. I got one eel and I lost one."

Karen turned the subject back to cooking.

"What goes into the eel stew?" she asked.

"You cut potatoes into tiny small pieces." Hank said, "Then you put parsley into it, onions, and a piece of butter. You cook the eel first, just so it starts to cook and then you put the other stuff in."

"What river do you fish in?" I asked and Hank gave me a sour look. Instantly I realized I had misused the local terminology.

"I won't eat no fish that comes out of the river," Hank said, "We go down back of Kaaterskill. Down near Catskill. It's part of that crick [creek]. It's the Kaaterskill Crick."

The term "river" in these parts refers only to the Hudson River which is in fact a 150 mile long tidal estuary where the eel enter from the ocean, swim upstream to mature in the brackish water of the river and the fresh water of the creeks and kills. Eventually some return to their place of birth in the Sargassos sea, some 17,000 km to the south, where they spawn, give birth and die. The term "crick" refers to the three fresh water streams (Esopus, Rondout, and Catskill) of this area, and the Dutch word "kill" refers to the higher and smaller streams. Eels are known to swim underground and over wet land in their search for the water's source. They often become landlocked and are documented as living as much as 50 years under these conditions.

While being questioned about the use of a "bob," a cluster of hooks baited with worms used to fish eel, Hank recalled his experience fishing eel with his uncles in the Hudson River near West Camp "We'd snap them out of the river there, in the cove." Hank said. "We used to eat them but once we found something in the eel and we never ate them after that. Too much garbage."

Although it has improved in recent years, the PCBs in

the Hudson River have made eels unsafe to eat. Eels have been tested acceptable in the higher fresh water streams.

Karen was curious to find out if eels bite.

"No," Hank told her, "They won't bite you. They get around your arm and they have grease over them. You can't hold 'em." He paused, thinking of his most recent experience, and added, "Well, that one didn't get away last night. I gave him one throw and he landed way back of my car on the road. When he hit the blacktop he couldn't do no more."

Hank told us he put the eel in his gunny sack, drove it home, and placed the creature in a five gallon pail of water until the morning when he killed and skinned it. Hank is careful not to put too much water in the pailwhich would let the eel escape. That's a lesson Hank learned from experience. "They don't get away from me now. I work too hard to get 'em," he said.

Hank remembers night fishing on the Esopus Creek with a torch and spear. It was a two-man operation. The torch bearer in the prow of the boat speared the eel and the man behind him removed it and put it in his sack. Once a popular method of eel fishing, it is no longer practiced in the Hudson Valley.

The traditions of spearing and trapping eels in the kills and creeks of the Hudson Valley during their downstream run in late September seem to have ended because fewer people crave it as a food. In the upper Delaware River and its tributary theNeversink, more than a dozen stone wiers exist at places where eels have been fished since prehistoric times.

Each summer at these broad shallow spots of the stream, the wooden traps and stone wiers, which funnel the eels into the traps, are repaired. There is only one commercial eel fisherman there. Daniel Conklin, who fishes in the Neversink, says Koreans would buy all the eel that local people can catch but that they fished primarily for their own use.

"Hank, tell us about the lamprey?" I asked, referring to the Sea Lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus Linneaus*), a snake-like fish similar to the eel but with a very different breeding and feeding patterns.

"Down in the Kaaterskill there's a natural dam. I've seen lamprey eels go right up through that water. They're no good to eat, them lamprey eels." Hank said that the small black population, native to the area, were thought to eat the tail of it.

"Oh, but the lampreys are awful looking things," he said, referring to the jawless mouth of sharp teeth which the lamprey uses to attach itself to a host fish.

"I don't think I'd want one of them."

"But you have eaten it?" Greg persisted.

"Oh, yeh," Hank replied.

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