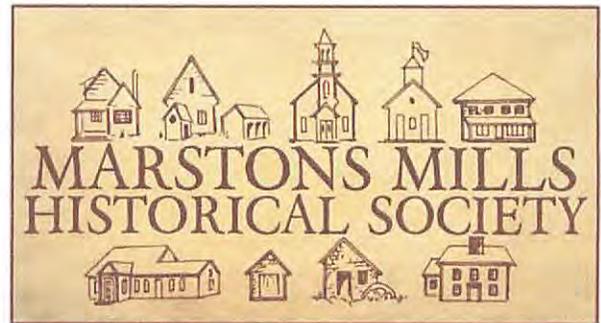
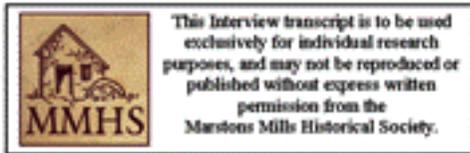


Marstons Mills Historical Society  
Interview with John F. Hamblin  
(by Jim Gould & Dianne Kavanagh Potter)  
February 8, 2014



P.O. Box 1375 Marstons Mills, MA 02648  
marstonsmillshistorical.org

Also present, his wife, Jeannette M. Hamblin and Trafton Hinckley (born 1942) whose comments are noted.

### THE CRANBERRY BOGS

Born in 1943, I was two when I was adopted by Mary Carm (Rogers) Hamblin (1900-86). She was a busy woman, especially in the summer, and I was fed then by her sister Mary Merced (Rogers) Hamblin (1896-1991). When my two brothers went off to the Army in 1941, my mother drove all the way to Texas to see them off. Back home, she took in three Chinese sisters as foster children when their father, Mr. Lee, who had a laundry near Boston, could not care for them. She couldn't adopt them, so she adopted me. We still visit them.

When I started in cranberries in 1977 my Mother said, "You're crazy, you'll never make it", but here I am!

The old Crocker house is at the corner of Bog Road and School Street. I used to weed gardens for Chester Crocker for 50 cents an hour! That was when we dry-picked with scoops in lanes between strings. Chester was fussy. He once told me: "You need a haircut, boy--It's too long." and cut it with hand clippers.

I began working for my father, Seth E. Hamblin (1898-1960). He was fussy about his bogs. You had to pick your row clean, or he'd send you back to pick the ones you missed. And no stepping on berries. The vines on the sides of the bog had to be trimmed straight so they were neat and not hanging over. Harvesting cranberries was serious work back in the day: no whistlin', no talkin', just work!

The Hamblin bogs (3 ½ acres north of River Road) have been in the family since 1860, begun by Luther Hamblin (1810-88), who bought the marsh from Zenas Hamblin. Luther built the bog and the farmhouse. His sons were all born in that house, built in 1830. The new owners want to tear it down. I wonder if MMHS can help me move the house over to my property so it can be preserved.

My Brother Seth's ("Teddy", born 1921) family has eight acres of bogs, including Luther's original bog, and Uncle Ned's bog (.5 acre) next to Luther's. There used to be a spring on this bog which provided good water to go with the whiskey drunk there. Teddy filled in the well for safety's sake. Teddy's wife Mary Hall Hamblin rebuilt one bog with one-half Stevens and one-half Howes cranberries. Luther Hamblin had 3 ½ acres of bog; Mary bought two acres that were originally owned by Jones, then Savery, then Carlton Hallett. Mary then bought 1 ½ acres from me; all that is now owned by Teddy's nieces. The bogs are idle now; going through probate.

Jeannette and I now have thirty and a half acres of bog:

- a. My first bog in 1977 was the Crocker/Jones 3 ½ acre bog next to my house. Originally Isaac Crocker's, it was rebuilt by Loring Jones, whose daughter Lena Childs sold it to us.
- b. Run Pond, through which the former herring run went out of Middle Pond, is 4 acres.

- c. Tom Jones Cove (3 ½ acres on the east of the Thomas Jones house on River Road) I got from Brian Cuddy.
- d. La Pointe bog east of River Rd. (13.5 acres) is named for my wife's maiden name and was built in 1880 by the Marstons Mills Cranberry Co., and went to Makepeace before us.
- e. The 5.5 acre M & M bog was named for (Orren) Mecarta and Makepeace. Makepeace outbid Malcolm Ryder in 1927 for \$27,000 -- a lot of money back then. It went to Bryan Cutty, and is now owned by us. It's one of the best bogs.

My son Eric has another thirty acres. He has three bogs:

- a. Cookhouse (11 acres).
- b. Winnie's (10.7 acres) named for Winnie Lovell (northwest of Cookhouse).
- c. Jimmy Crocker started Uncle Jigger's bog on 10.5 acres; it then went to Chester Crocker, to Arvo Sipila, 2 years under Don Coombs, to Makepeace, to Hostetter, to Comeau of United Cranberry, to Bryan Cutty, and in January 2009 to my son Eric Hamblin.
- d. Old Company (east of Bog Road). Cookhouse was separated from Winnie's by a dyke in 1929. Old Company used to be owned by Makepeace.
- e. He also runs the 2.5 acre Ryder bog for Gail Melix and Mary Savery in Santuit.

There are three main varieties of cranberries grown in Massachusetts now:

- Early Blacks, discovered in Harwich in 1852, first berries to market in September.
- Howes: discovered in East Dennis in 1843; harvested about three weeks after the Early Blacks.
- Stevens, discovered in New Jersey in 1940.

We grow twenty acres of Stevens variety, five acres of Early Black variety, and five acres of Howes.

#### OTHER BOG OWNERS

Most of the bogs were owned by A.D. Makepeace, run by Roger Burlingame, who learned from Roscoe Brackett. He grew Early Blacks and late Howes. Makepeace even made a business of selling water lilies. Water was moved by Pierce-Arrow gasoline pumps. Roger told me about the time when the make-and-break engine on the Baker bog blew up; the belt rubbed on the wooden spindle, and lit the gasoline. Roger Burlingame said it left "nothin' but kindlin'!" all over the bog. The Makepeace bogs were:

- a. The 20 acre Newtown Big Bog off of River Road (by Richie O'Connell's) which I bought from Bryan Cutty, who got it from Cumberland Farms, which Hostetter got from Makepeace.
- b. The Baker bogs were among Makepeace's best, like Malcolm Ryder's bogs off of Wakeby Road. The best bogs are based on what is on the bottom and the variety and the yield.

The Pondview bog (1.3 acres next to Halpert's) was rebuilt in 1949. It went from Crocker to Coombs and his partner, to Dave McCarthy, now owned by Spillance, leased and operated by me.

The bog (2 acres) to the west of the Hamblin bogs belonged originally to Luther's son Edmund Hamblin (1837-1911), whose house was just across Newtown Road, inherited by his wife Rose Jones. This was bought in 1913 by Franklin Whitcomb. At the source of the Marstons Mills River, it had lots of trout in springtime, according to Trafton Hinckley.

The two acre bog to the east of the two Hamblin bogs belongs to "Peleg" Warren Hallett, a substitute mailman, who inherited it from his father Carlton Hallett. Warren had a bog he sold to Charlie Savery, who sold it to my sister-in-law Mary Hall Hamblin.

The eight acre Old Company Upper bog west of Bog Road was originally Makepeace's. I sold it to Alton Smith who sold it to Powers who leased it for 99 years to Bob Hallett of Osterville. Makepeace rebuilt this in 1950.

Colonel Hollidge had a small five acre bog between Middle and Hamblin ponds.

The 13 acre Shields bog behind Pepper's Pantry has run out. Shields also had the Fuller bog. Curtis's bog on Lovell's Pond went to his young son, who died; Royce Baker ran it and is now owned by lawyer Perry of Wareham.

## CHANGES

The cranberry business has changed a lot over the years.

In the 1890s many bogs were share-owned by different families. Snap scoops were used primarily for new plantings because they did less damage to the young plants. John showed us a snap scoop with stencil marked BFR, for Bertram F. Ryder. Trafton Hinckley said he got 25 cents a box for hand-scooping in 1957. At one time they paid only 10 cents an hour. In the 1950s they stopped using wooden scoops and started using dry harvesters. Darlington and Western were the first dry-picking machines and are still in use; Darlington was made first in New Jersey and Hayden made a deal to make them here.

In 1979, Makepeace paid me \$3.10 an hour when I worked for him for several months to learn how to run out the irrigation pipes and work the bogs.

Back in the day, laborers would use "walk behind" water pickers into the late 50s and early 60s. Water-picking started in the mid-60s. In the late sixties we had walk-behind machines. Then that switched to mechanical in the 70s, then hydraulic in the 80s. The Hayden separator was made in Wareham; owned by St. Jacques. Around 1978-79, ride-on water pickers came in to being; look like bulldozers. I had to learn to use it myself, in Hanson.

Workers screened the cranberries to get rid of the vines and put the fruit into boxes without any sorting. The trash, full of briars, was burned. Women like Doris Souza, Margaret Duarte and Mrs. Lopes would tally the boxes as they were filled.

Screening of cranberries was done at Makepeace's screen house in West Barnstable until the late 60s, located across the parking area from the railroad station there.

Manuel Roderick, Sr. was still working for Makepeace when he was 90 years old, until they wouldn't come to pick him up any more. Manuel did a lot of hand scything and other work around the bog banks. Plastic and Styrofoam booms replaced the old wooden floats around 2000.

My grandfather shipped cranberries in barrels to the Boston and New York markets. My Father shipped to Ocean Spray in Onset from about 1935 on.

Insect Control: Way back, we used a variety of ways to fight the insects. Now, there is a company (Beaton) that does Integrated Pest Management (IPM); they come in and tell you what insect controls to use.

Fertilizer: These days we use 10 / 10 / 5 or slow release 18 / 11 / 7 fertilizer with urea; a lot less phosphorus these days. Even the retention ponds have no pollution.

IN THE OLD DAYS (according to Trafton Hinckley and JH):

John: My grandfather grew corn on the back field.

In the old winter days, people used eel grass in the gardens. Prunings from cranberry vines were shoved into the ground around the farmhouses to insulate against the frost.

Trafton: Herring: Alewife (pron. all-wife) and blue backs are fresh water; real herring are saltwater only. There used to be a herring company down by the Mill Pond.

John: Makepeace built the herring run in 1800 for \$500 or \$600; a lot of money then. Way back there were herring wardens.

John: Even in the sixties people would go there and just strip the females for eggs, and throw the bodies up on the bank with the males.

John: The herring would sometimes miss the ladder and come up into the bogs, but they'd turn around and go back to "The Cut".

Trafton caught as many as 50 to 60 muskrats each year for their pelts; also raccoons and skunks. John: And before Trafton, there was trapper Bob Conway, foreman for Makepeace.

Trafton: We'd catch frogs and feast on frog legs. There used to be a rocky "Hogback" between Middle and Mystic, but the rocks are all gone.

Ally Coleman who lived in Bump's River had a two-wheeled cart pulled by a pair of horses.

John: Cape Verdeans did a lot of the hard work. I remember Marshall Lopes who had a hook in place of his left hand. The Finns were also hardworkers at fishing and on the bogs. I have two sheds that Makepeace built to house the worker on the La Point bog next to the Men's Club Quonset hut on River Road, and one from Cookhouse bog, used for storage.

TODAY

Dry picking vs. flooding: with dry picking, you have to wait until the bog is completely dry; may not be able to start until late morning to avoid dampness on the berries.

Flooding of bogs starts around Christmastime, using a lift pump to protect the berries from windburn and freezing. If the ice gets too thick, the berries don't get oxygen, so this process is repeated two to three times over the winter.

Sand is optimally used every third year; starts when there is six inches of ice. Unfrozen bogs can get windburn. The last protection is usually around March 20th. Frost can be a factor, even from April 15<sup>th</sup> to June 10<sup>th</sup>.

These days, Ocean Spray cranberries go for \$45 for a 100 lb. barrel of fresh fruit vs. \$7 - \$15 on the independent market for the same amount of processed fruit.

There's a lot more competition. Quebec and British Columbia are growers now. Quebec just got in over the last 10 - 20 years, growing only hybrids. Wisconsin stripped their old bogs and is now also growing only hybrids. With the increased yield from hybrids, we are now simply producing more cranberries than we can sell!

We're a medium-sized grower on Cape Cod. The biggest growers on the Cape are Handy Real Estate Trust in Cataumet with 400 acres of bogs; Hallett has 90 acres, mostly in Yarmouth; Jenkins has 75 acres in West Barnstable; and Hamblin has 60 acres. There's also Craig Williams in Dennis/Yarmouth (40 - 50 acres) and Linc Thatcher in Harwich with 30 - 35 acres. In Sandwich, Dick Cannon has 20 - 30 acres, and Beaton has a 10-acre bog growing a new variety.