

Berry pickin' a social event long ago

By Gordon B. Seavey

Early summer was berry picking time in Westford a century ago as local farmers harvested a quick cash crop. Starting with strawberries in late June, the raspberries would ripen just after the 4th of July. By the end of this month, the blackberry season came to the front.

The blackberry season is now on -- and what brings this story to mind is a bank of blackberries in the center of town which is very likely a descendant of those planted and harvested nearly a century ago, now "running wild." You'll be told where this giant patch now runs wild, for free pickings, at the conclusion of this bit of Westford Wanderings.

Most noted growers were John Langtree across from the town hall, the Atwood Brothers at Hildreth and Concord roads, Augustus Bunce on Providence Road and Noah Prescott on Boston (then School) Road.

Strawberries were grown flat on the ground as many folks know from picking their own at nearby farms. Raspberries and blackberries appear on bush-like cane and could be picked without much stooping. The cane was contained in rows, held in place with a single strand of wire on either side of the row and running the full length of the line of berries.

Raspberries were the most delicate, harvested in pint boxes and demanded the best price. Wet or humid weather could cause mold and there could be a deadly fungus on the cane, hard to control. The crop came in season starting around July 4th and berry

picking was no fun for kids on that day when one could hear the band tuning up at the Common, preparing for the start of the annual parade.

Full Bushes

Blackberries came more easily off the vines, but the thorns on the cane were long, sharp and in great profusion. Women and girls were the fastest pickers because of the agility of their fingers, and the smart ones wore long cotton socks over their sleeves and gloves on their hands with the finger tips just showing. Even then, one might say that blackberry picking was not a genteel occupation as whipping vines could cause many a scratch on the face.

Westford Wanderings

The old variety was called the Snyder and bore heavily; but it was a joy when the Eldorado, a larger and longer berry was introduced.

These berries were picked into quart boxes, being larger and more hardy than the delicate raspberry. Berries were picked in wooden crates (later redeemable) holding 32 quart or 60 pint boxes of fruit.

Some said berrypicking was fun and great socializing. Every now and then a cry and a snicker would spread over the field: "Have you got your bottom covered?" After harvesting for the day, the boys ran off to Burge's

Pond for a bit of skinny-dipping.

At the end of the day, farmers brought their produce to a center location for joint shipment to Fanuell Hall Market. That center was the piazza attached to the front of a store which stood next to the Library.

Teamsters for the 30-mile overnight haul to Boston were local folk, such as William Kittredge, Bill Wright and John Greig. Perley Wright started in 1910 with a horse and wagon; later with a REO Speed Wagon, a light canopy covered truck of the era, the nucleus of a business which later became known as the giant Wright Trucking Co.

Fatal accident

Eighty years ago, Amos R. Leighton was returning from the Boston Market with horse and team. The night before, he had loaded his wagon with local produce, mostly his own berries, and began the nine-hour drive to the city.

On the return trip for rest, lunch, and to feed the horse, he had removed the animal's bridle near a watering trough in East Lexington.

After slipping the feed bag over the animal's head, he sat in front of the beast to keep it quiet. Apparently a brisk breeze whipped the tarpaulin in the back of the wagon toward the animal.

According to the *Lexington Minuteman* newspaper, "the frightened animal started off on a run. Mr. Leighton grabbed at the har-

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ness to try to check the horse's flight when, in some way, the reins got tangled up in the horse's feet and it fell down, rolling on top of the man. The animal struggled to his feet and in doing so trampled on the prostrate man, who had probably been rendered unconscious by the fall.

"The horse struck at the man in such a way that the right leg was broken and there was a terrible fracture at the base of the skull which had caused instant death."

Leighton, 40, left a wife and child.

One of the producers of fine fruit was the Old Homestead farm on Depot Street. Most of this land was taken in 1955 on which to build a new (and third) Westford Academy, now the Abbott Middle School.

And on this land, forty feet from the street and to the left of the building, lies this ancient but still busy berry patch. Good pickin' — but watch out for the pricklers and poison ivy.

Date missing