Dedication Address
Honorarium - Cranberry Culture in Central Wisconsin
by Dr. George L. Peltier
August 8, 1959

We are met today to pay homage to a small group of sturdy, tough-minded men, with an everlasting stick-to-itiveness, who in spite of numerous trials and tribulations, due to the continual hazards of frosts and fires, floods and drought, plus the ups and downs in prices, managed to build an industry in spite of the vicissitudes of a harsh and raw environment.

The spark which ignited the cranberry industry in the former glacial bed of Lake Wisconsin in South Wood County stemmed from the expansion and boom in the Berlin area from 1850 to 1870.

In 1870 some of the younger men without sufficient capital to buy suitable land at inflated prices in the Berlin area started out to locate desirable areas of inexpensive government lands. During this decade, Whittlesey and R. Smith bought raw land in this area (Cranmoor) to be followed shortly by the Bennetts, Potters, Searls, Fitches, Rezins, Gaynors, Arpins, and others, until by 1900 approximately 1000 acres were under cultivation, in spite of the disastrous fires of the eighties and nineties, which broke the spirits of the weak-hearted and left a core of rugged individuals to carry on.

We should not forget, however, the part that the women folks played in the development of the industry, since by their encouragement and willingness to share the daily hardships, make life bearable for their menfolks and families. It is indeed interesting to note that the descendants of the pioneers, through to the

fourth generation, control either directly or indirectly upwards of 75% of the present cranberry acreage in the state. I can speak from my personal contacts, since I knew and worked with most of these folks during my four summers on the cranberry station (1908-11).

As it turned out, the Berlin area went into a rapid decline in the eighties due .. primarily to the use of the alkaline waters of the Fox River for flooding. Somewhat later bogs were established in Juneau, Jackson, and Monroe Counties. After World War I bogs were carved out from the wilds in the Northwest and since World War II, in the Northeastern part of the state, until today the total acreage in Wisconsin is in excess of 4,000 producing acres, with a crop value of 4 million dollars, which exceeds the value of either apples, cherries, or strawberries produced in the state.

In the beginning small areas of wild cranberries were located and fenced in. Early it was discovered that they had to be protected from frosts, so that a plentiful supply of water became imperative and reservoirs were established with a series of ditches to move the water on and off the beds. This in turn necessitated level beds, so scalping, leveling and sanding soon became the standard practice. During this period, hand tools for cutting ditches, planting and other chores were developed as well as scalping plows and other horse-drawn equipment.

Also during this epoch, the observant growers selected from the wild vines what they deemed to be outstanding types. Of some 30 to 40 such selections grown, only one became outstanding; i.e., the Searls which was selected by Andrew Searls in 1893. At the present time over 60% of the acreage in the state is now planted to this productive variety.

In 1903 the College of Agriculture extablished the cranberry station (opposite the Gaynor marsh) which contributed to the general advance of the industry

in the use of fertilizers, control of insect and fungal pests, water management and proper cultural practices. Unfortunately, the station was discontinued in 1917 due to the lack of funds. In this connection it is well to mention some of the scientists responsible for aiding solve some of the pressing problems.

The following names come to mind: Malde, Hardenberg, Rogers, Stevens, Bain and Goldsworthy. Each made distinct contributions in his special field.

May I briefly mention some of the outstanding developments of the industry in Wood County by decades:

1870 - 80 The beginning

1880 - 90 Improved methods of water control for frost protection, scalping, sanding and drainage.

1890 - 1900 Disastorous fires and replanting. Selection and propagation of the Searls variety.

1900 - 10 The experiment station established. The founding of the American Exchange with A. U. Chaney in charge of sales.

1910 - 20 Expansion of acreage, either by additions to going marshes or the start of new developments.

1920 - 30 The outstanding discovery of the cause of "false blossom" and methods for its control.

1930 - 40 The digging of the "cranberry ditch" from the Wisconsin River to the Cranmoor area which fortunately afforded supplies of sufficient flood water for the then stricken drought areas.

1940 - 50 Rapid increase in acreage, due to the inflated prices received during the war years.

1950 - 60 The impact of the machine age, with mechanical rakes, driers, and diverse labor saving equipment. The introduction of the

organic phosphorus for insect control as well as the carbomates for fungus diseases. A new approach to the fertilizer problem. The introduction of chemical weed killers--all of which have contributed to increase yields, which in 1958 averaged over 90 bbls. per acre as contrasted to less than 20 bbls. per acre in 1900. Truly a remarkable achievement.

What of the future? I visualize with our present "know-how," average yields of 100 bbls. or more per acre with an annual state production of ½ million bbls., without too much expansion in acreage.

Improved methods of storage, milling and packaging a better quality product are in the offing. Yearly increased yields will force the development of new methods for disposing of the crop. This serious problem is now facing the growers. Will the present generation have the fortitude, courage and judgement of their forefathers in facing up to the problems of the future? Only time will tell.