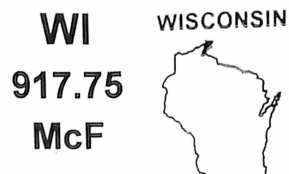




# **John and Barbara McFarland Interview**

February 24, 2015

Early Cranberry Life in Manitowish Waters



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Filmed by Jim Robinson.

Recorded by Janelle Kohl.

Janelle: Today is Tuesday, February 24, 2015. Thank you John for allowing us to interview you for information on Manitowish Waters history of the cranberry business.

John- I will do my best to remember. My family was one of the earliest families in the cranberry business in Manitowish Waters.

Janelle: When and Where were you born?

John: Madison, WI 1938 9-25. I am 76.

We did not live there for long, my mom and dad lived there for a bit but I was only 2 1/2 when we moved and have no memory of living there. In 1941 they moved to Minneapolis and my dad worked at Honeywell for the duration of the war. In 1945 after the war my dad quit his job and helped my maternal step-grandfather, Guy Potter a cranberry grower from the Tomah area, who married my grandmother during the war, search for a suitable cranberry location in northern Wisconsin. Guy got to know my parents and told them that when the war was ended he knew a group of people that wanted to join the cranberry business and he told my folks that if they were interested he would also help them get started in the cranberry business. So after the war ended my dad quit his



job and my grandfather arranged for my dad to get some construction jobs down in the Tomah area in order to learn how to operate heavy equipment. They set out to look at locations and found 3, one in the Eagle River area, one in the Hayward area and one in the Manitowish Waters area. They settled on Manitowish Waters. My recollection of how they actually distributed the properties to the eight parties involved is not entirely clear but I believe my granddad bought all of the property which was a quadrant on the northeast side of Little Trout Lake then he set about dividing up the parcels into eight distinct properties and each of the eight individuals interested purchased a parcel from my granddad. He arranged for a sweetheart contract for my dad to do the initial dredging and development work for each of the eight growers and that entailed ditches to access Little Trout Lake for water and then preparing ten acres for each grower for planting. He did the rough work for that and it was up to the growers to do the finishing work in order to have the beds suitable to be planted for cranberries. After that everyone was on their own.

Janelle: Do you recall the eight groups who purchased from your grandfather?

John:

Yes. The mother and father of Betty Koller, Bert and Anna Leasure; Delbert Bartling, Fred Bartling's dad and Michael's grandfather; Herb Indermuehle, Dick Indermuehle's father and

Richard Intermuhel's granddad; Howard Folsom, Tom Folsom's father; Clearance Weber who I do not know a lot about, but I believe he had a lumber mill in southern Wisconsin. I met him a few times as a child. A Dr. Mallard, who purchased a parcel but didn't start development work and then sold his land to Harold Gross. Then there was my mom and dad. And there was one other person, Dahlman, I believe a major in the army. He never developed his property beyond the initial preparation my father did. Ultimately, Dahlman sold it to Howard Folsom, as the property was immediately adjacent to his and Howard developed it along with Don Rayala. Weber had a couple people manage his marsh for him, with the first person being Abe Alexander and eventually he left and Charlie Rayala Senior, old Charlie, became the manager there. Then it was sold eventually to a group of people who were from the Eagle River Cooperative and they had it for a number of years and then Dick Indermuehle bought it. It was just absorbed into the Indermuehle's property. Harold Gross hired a manager to develop his property and after some initial work was started had to let his current manager go and hired Joe McClellan to continue the development. Harold ultimately sold his property to Fred Bartling.

This is to the best of my recollection. Some of this information may not be as precise as it should be or could be. But the outline of the initial cranberry development is pretty much as I described.

-BREAK-

John : Harold was a civil servant who worked for the government and I am not at all clear as to what his connection was to the rest of the group. He may have been a friend of Vernon Goldsworthy who was a developer of the Eagle River properties. And I believe that Howard and Vernon Goldsworthy were friends. How they connected with my granddad I am not sure. .

Janelle: Today, who are the ones remaining of the original 7.

John: The Bartling Family, and Tom Folsom, Howard's son. That is pretty much it. The first two. Indermeuhles purchased the Weber property and then they sold their property to an insurance corporation that buys farm properties and they have a very long investment horizon, so something like a cranberry property is a very good investment for them. Our property was sold to Northland Cranberry Company and the Koller's sold to Northland Cranberry also, so that took those two cranberry families out of the picture. Tom Folsom and Don Rayala who was Howard Folsom's manager for many years and then the two properties split, Tom Folsom received the original Folsom property and Don received the Dahlman Property. So that is the distribution of the properties today.

Janelle: Do you have any recollection of your grandfather talking and saying how much the land cost.

John: No. I do not know what the cost was. They bought it from the Lutheran Aid Society. I can remember a lot of

conversation in our house between my granddad and my mom and dad and others of the group that were purchasing these properties from the Lutheran Aid Society and there was some difficulty with getting the transaction completed, but ultimately it went through. But I have no idea how much they paid for it but I am sure that it was right after the war and the prices would seem unreal today because you could buy so much for so little. But anyway that is how it started and that is how they bought the property.

The cost of developing the cranberry property has, I suppose in real dollars it might be cheaper today because so much more is mechanized now and goes so much faster. They can do a better job of preparation because of the mechanization and some of the technical developments that have occurred in how to move large amounts of soil and to make sure the soil was properly graded to exact specifications, which was work that was done by hand very laboriously back when we started and today it goes very quickly. It is not cheap but it is very, very efficient and we end up with a superior product in the end. You get beds that are absolutely ready to be planted and they are in perfect shape and usually the newly planted beds take off and grow (extremely well. I have been astounded recently to see some plantings and how quickly they develop. When we originally started it took from the time you planted the bed, and there was at least a year before that in preparation, maybe more, you waited three years usually, sometimes longer before you could harvest. So there was a four year period from the time you started to the time you harvested your first

crop, there was no income coming in. Everything was going out, nothing was coming in.

John: The early years were kind of interesting. I was just a kid at that time. I was 7 years old. I was coming from a city. I was in hog heaven up here. This was a wilderness area. You go out in the woods to go walk around all day, go fishing or whatever. I thought it was pretty cool. But the early years were primitive. When we started the cranberry development, the area which development took place was virgin country. There was an old road that branched off of Powell road and led down to what was a girl's camp on the south western shore of Alder Lake, there was no other road but that. That was the only access there was into the property that was to be developed. The cranberry growers had to clear the roads and make the infrastructure so they could do what needed to be done. We had no electricity, or phone and it was pretty primitive at first. When they really got things fairly well started they put another access road in off of South Townline road which is now Alder Lake Road. They put in a wooden bridge across the Trout River and when that wore out it was replaced with a very large culvert called the tube for so many years. Most all of us used that new road as access to get out of the properties we were developing. Any phone communication went through Ahlert's Grocery Store on Highway 51. Either people called in and left a message at Ahlert's or one of the growers had to go up to Ahlert's to make a phone call. That went on for quite a long while. I remember a meeting between the growers as a group and Mr. Rowbell who

owned the telephone company. He was very reluctant to do anything because I think he felt these people were fly-by-night group, and didn't want to put a lot of money into putting a telephone line down where nothing was going to come of it. But anyway they finally got the phone lines in. We did not have power. It was light plants or kerosene lamps for a long time. Electricity eventually came in about 1949. I remember vividly we had a light plant behind the house and the bloody thing caught fire three or four times, it seemed every time I looked out the window it was burning but, fortunately, nothing disastrous ever came of it.

It was somewhere around 1949 or 1950 when the power company agreed to install power lines, but we had to cut the trees where the lines were to go. It was very hard work mostly by hand as we didn't have much in the way of power tools. Even with the beginning of mechanization which was relatively limited at that time, there was still an enormous amount of hand work that was involved.

Janelle: And it was up to the cranberry growers to get these roads in and their own money was used to make these roads.

Jim: A lot of these original settlers lived to be 100 years old. It must have been the hard work that kept them alive.

John: It was hard work and by the end of the day you didn't have a whole lot left. All you wanted to do was go to bed, get up the next day and do it all over again. But we had good times too. The families would get together. They did have

picnics on Little Trout Lake. I remember those. Whenever anyone got married it was mandatory to be chivariated. That was a big event for the kids involved. They could be out at night and whoop it up a bit. There was a one room school house when we started school here. Shortly after that they put a second room on, but I remember vividly it was a one room school.

Janelle: Do you recall when it was built?

John: No. I can't tell you when it was built. I know there was a school located on an old road near DeerPark. And I think that Cal LaPorte and Dolly Tirpe went to the school there.

I remember Jim LaPorte was in the grade school when I started. So it is somewhere between Jim and Cal that is when the school was built, but I don't know when that was.

Janelle: You went all your grade school years in Manitowish Waters?

John: Yes, Barb and I went to the same grade school on Hwy. 51. We met when I was in 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> grade and she was in 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> grade. So we have known each other for a long time.

Janelle: When did you get married?

John: 1957. It is getting close to 60 years now.

Janelle: Any children?



John: Three children, 10 grandchildren, 4 great grandchildren. It is fun. They are all doing well. I am very well blessed.

Janelle: Did any of your three children have an interest in your cranberry business?

John: Our oldest son was interested in the business but we had an opportunity to sell the business and we decided it was the best thing all the way around for the family. So we did that. Our two sons have successfully gone on to do other things. Our daughter was living out in Seattle with a thriving law practice, but I am sure they would have liked to have been in the business also but it just wasn't going to work at that time. When people approached us to see if we were interested in selling they offered us a price which was basically too good to refuse, we decided it was time. And every business has a best possible time to sell. I don't know if ours was the best time or not but it sure looked like it at the time and I am still very happy what we did when we did. We sold in 1996. We had just celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the cranberry business and had hosted the Wisconsin Cranberries Association that summer and a few weeks after they met here we finalized the sale and sold the property. Almost 50 years to the day we had purchased it.

Janelle: Did you bring any pictures? I see there is a magazine with you.



John: This is just a reference. It is a magazine the Growers Association published for the Wisconsin Cranberry Growers annual meeting. They do this every year. They go from cranberry property to cranberry property and it gives us all a chance to travel around a little bit and see how somebody else does things. There is always a chance you can learn something from someone else you haven't thought of. It got to be very popular. There was quite a crowd that showed up for this (holding up his magazine). The Bartlings had hosted it up here two to three years prior to that and there was a big group for that. Almost every one of the Grower's Association meetings we went to, no matter where they were held, were heavily attended by the growers. It was a good opportunity to see people you don't get to see that often and see them on their property and with their equipment. It was a good place to expand your knowledge a little bit.

Janelle: When you got older and old enough to help at the cranberry marsh, what did you do?

John: As a kid I worked at the marsh a lot. There were a lot of days of school I missed during harvest. My mom and dad needed extra help. They would say.. "c'mon kid we got things to do." I always think of a story my granddad would tell when he was a young man working for his dad and they had a disagreement and as far as my granddad was concerned a fairly big disagreement and he told his father he was going to leave the marsh and he was going to South Dakota and for gold

and come back a rich man. So he did just that and two years later he came back dead broke. There was a little bit of that in me and my relationship with my dad.

Barb and I got married in 1957. We left the area and moved out to Colorado for a couple years. We really missed Wisconsin, Colorado was beautiful and I don't mean to disparage it in any way, but we grew up in Wisconsin and there was all this forest and all these lakes. We felt more connected to the land here. Colorado had the magnificent mountains but they were hard to get close to, not like the forests and lakes. Homesickness brought us back. So we came back home and worked on the marsh. Dad was having some health issues. Eventually it was too much and I took over the operation. Dad died in 1973. Mom (June) remarried Claude Sutherland from Mercer. A wonderful, wonderful man. We decided the property needed to get settled properly. Dad died intestate which isn't necessarily bad but there were no formal arrangements so I asked mom if she would consider selling the property to Barb and I. She said she would. We had a family attorney whom we had done business with for many, many years. I said why don't you talk to the attorney, establish a price and whatever it is we will pay so they did and we did. In 1976 we bought the property from the family and that is how it came to be sold to Barb and I. We became sole owners of the property and just went on from there.

Janelle: Were you an only child?

John: No I am not. I have a brother and a sister. My sister is six years younger than I am and my brother and I share the same birthday and he is 21 years younger than I am. So it was an interesting 21<sup>st</sup> birthday for me. We were out in Colorado celebrating my "coming-of-age", and I got a call from Wisconsin. My sister was on the phone and she said "Mom had a baby boy today, on your birthday!" And my brother Joe and my sister Ann are two of the nicest people you ever want to meet. My brother is just an incredible young man and has done wonderful things for himself and his family. My sister raised four wonderful kids and has grandkids all over the place. It has been a pretty good family all the way around.

Janelle: Do you have any specific stories with being in the Cranberry business that stand out?

John: There were a number of things that would happen. I used to say that the cranberry business surprises were not any fun because it usually was something you should have done or not done but didn't, or didn't know about but should have known about and the consequences were not all good but we lived through some interesting years. In 1959 for example, the Secretary of the USDA said that based on some of the studies that they have been doing on the residue left in cranberries from the use of the weed killer Aminotriazol had proved to cause cancer in rats and they wanted all the fruit on which it had been used to be pulled from the market. They announced that about 3 weeks before Thanksgiving which at that time was our big season that was when we sold a bulk of our crop and

- our sales evaporated and it was a very tough couple of years. We lost the equivalent of about  $1 \frac{1}{2}$  years of income before we could dig our way out of that hole. Whether the research proved anything or not it was kind of the beginning of the era of which the USDA and the FDA would seriously research chemical residues in food products. If there was any chance of cancer developing in human beings, nobody knew for sure but if they had evidence of it causing cancer in rats they didn't want people to be ingesting it. That was a signal event in my early years of the cranberry business. Back in 1985 we had a hail storm come through and it basically wiped out the crops of all of the growers with the exception of one, I think Tom Folsom and Don Rayala. Their marsh escaped the worst of the worst of the damage. I think they had some damage but it wasn't as severe. Everyone else was just about wiped out. That happened at a time when the cranberry starts to develop the potential for the following year's crop, late in the summer, usually late July. The plant makes a little tiny bud, the potential for the following year's crop, is developed. And if the vines are damaged in any way prior to that, a lot of times they won't create that bud. And that is what happened in this hailstorm. So we lost our entire crop in 1985 and lost about  $\frac{1}{2}$  of our crop in 1986 because the vines didn't set the buds the way they normally would have. The next year's crop potential was severely diminished. It was a tough thing to live through but we made it. And those are the kind of things in farming you have to deal with. Those were the negatives. Some of the positive things were a myriad number of nights during the summer time when I was on frost watch and spent

many hours on the marsh under a canopy of stars that seemed close enough to touch.

Cranberries grow in bogs, which are lower than the surrounding landscape and usually have significantly cooler night time temperatures than in the highlands, often getting down to or below freezing. Since the cranberry is very sensitive to frost damage we had to protect them from freezing. One of the ways we have been doing that for years now is through the sprinkler system. So when the temperatures get down into the critical range, we would start the sprinkler systems and spray the vines with water to protect them from frost damage. That means you are out there a lot of nights, not getting any sleep, especially in the spring where cold nights could often occur every night for several weeks. One of the things that happens when it gets quite cold, is the sprinkled water will often times freeze on the plants. The plants are OK as long as you continue to sprinkle water on them because the water, as it freezes, liberates some heat and the plant absorbs that heat and keeps it from freezing. But in the morning you have these little tiny ice covered cranberry vines and when the sun hits it, it looks like a field of diamonds. It is really, really beautiful. So, you see a lot of stuff out there.

Janelle: Did the marshes have honeybees?

John: Yes. Bees became popular and were introduced into the industry a while back. I don't remember in the early years if we had honeybees or not. Eventually, I do remember we did

have them regularly. We rent the hives from the beekeepers and they do enhance productivity of the plant. You hope you do get a good crop of bumblebees because bumblebees are just wonderful pollinators and you augment the honeybees with the bumblebees and it does help with production.

Jim: Can you explain the co-ops?

John: My granddad was instrumental in helping Ocean Spray become a national co-op. When we started the cranberry business there was no national organization, they were all regional co-ops, one of which was Ocean Spray and that started out in Massachusetts and I am not exactly sure if this is the correct information but I think two people in

Massachusetts were pretty instrumental, one was a fellow by the name of Clarence Makepeace and another gentleman named Marcus Uran they were members of the Ocean Spray Co-op in Massachusetts and my granddad who was a member of one of the Wisconsin Co-ops either Midwest or Eatmore, (I don't remember which) got together with them, there may have been other people involved that I am not aware of, and decided that maybe they could form a national co-operative that would include Massachusetts and Wisconsin growers. So my granddad came back to Wisconsin and he set about lobbying all the growers to agree to join Ocean Spray and it would become a national co-op if they did. There was some opposition to that, surprisingly, one of the people that was most against it was my granddad's brother, Roy Potter and it caused a serious split between my granddad and his brother Roy, but my granddad



eventually prevailed and thus a large number of Wisconsin growers signed up to join Ocean Spray, as did growers in Massachusetts and New Jersey. Eventually they brought Washington state and Oregon state growers into the co-op as well. I don't know how many different regions currently belong to it. There are growers in Canada, Chile, and Europe and maybe other countries that belong to it as well. So that is how the initial organization evolved and Ocean Spray became a national co-op and is now an international organization. I think 85% of the national crop was marketed by Ocean Spray at one time. But with the development that has gone on in the last 25 - 30 years a lot of independents came in and did not want Ocean Spray membership. They either marketed their berries themselves or belonged to a regional handler that marketed the product for them. So that pretty much covers the co-op. I know that Betty Koller's dad, Mr. Leisure, was on the board of director's Ocean Spray for a short period of time. Michael Bartling is on the board, as was his dad, Fred. Howard Gross, one of the original growers, was also a board member. So the people of Wisconsin, and the Manitowish Waters growers have been involved for a long period of time.

We were talking about the difference between the Massachusetts growing technique and Wisconsin grower's technique. When we started cranberry growing, Massachusetts out-produced Wisconsin growers very significantly. One of the reasons for the Massachusetts productivity was the fact that the number of acres under cultivation in Massachusetts was significantly higher than in Wisconsin at that time. However,

- Wisconsin's development potential was significantly greater than was Massachusetts and eventually this led to an ever greater number of new acres being planted in Wisconsin which pushed Wisconsin's production ahead of Massachusetts. It could do this much more easily than Massachusetts simply because available land in Massachusetts was very very limited and there was a lot of available land here in Wisconsin plus it was easier to develop here. The land that we had in Wisconsin was free from some of the problems that some of the Massachusetts growers had to cope with, which had to do a lot with either water supply or the fact that the land didn't lend itself to develop in a way which would maximize the efficiency and productivity of the property. Wisconsin growers developed a technique called "water harvest" which allowed the berries to be picked fairly efficiently. Cranberry vines grow only a few inches high (2" - 3") in depth and from that vine grow upright shoots which are 3 to 6 inches in height, that little upright has 4,5,6,7 or more flowers on it and many of those flowers developed fruit. So as that fruit develops it gets heavier and heavier and the weight carries the upright down until it is laying nearly flat. Because the fruit weight has carried the vine down you have a mass of vines with a lot of fruit on them all packed together which made it difficult to pick the berries without either damaging the fruit or the vines. Wisconsin growers found that when you flooded the bed the vine stood upright because the berries acted like little bobbars so now you have them all standing up and ready to be picked which made it much easier for a picking instrument go into the vines, pull the berries loose without damaging the vines or the berries. This



made for a much faster and more efficient harvest operation. And that was one of the things that helped the Wisconsin growers increase productivity, and brought us up to parity and then helped us to far exceed productivity of Massachusetts. I don't mean Massachusetts growers now aren't productive. They are and they have adopted most of the practices that have led to enormous increases in crop yields. When we started picking our first crop, we probably picked 50-60 barrels to the acre and when crops got really going with production we were averaging 100-200 barrels an acre. Current varieties that have been developed since we started the business now are yielding as much as 550-600 barrels per acre. That is an enormous amount of fruit. The acre is roughly 45,000 square feet. At 500 barrels an acre, and a barrel weighs 100 lbs., that is 50,000 pounds of berries per acre. That is a pound a square foot. That is a lot of berries.

Given that Wisconsin suffered a significant advantage in available cultivable cranberry property, the development here in Wisconsin was fairly rapid and eventually we outstripped Massachusetts. I can't cite the specific numbers since I have been out of the business for close to 20 years but Wisconsin is producing far more fruit than MA.

Extra stuff:

Barbara McFarland, wife to John

In the early 1930's, Barbara's grandfather purchased a large parcel of land in Manitowish Waters including frontage along the western end of Little Star Lake and a portion of the land

the airport is built on. He developed the Manito Lodge resort and that is where Barbara spent her childhood summers returning to their home in Evanston, Illinois in the fall. Her mother (Trudy) was an entrepreneurial spirit and she and Barbara's dad (Ed) built a restaurant called "The Pantry" at the intersection of Highway 51 and Powell Road. Her mom stayed all summer with Barbara, enrolling her in the grade school in the fall until the season ended and they returned to Evanston. We met as little kids in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, seems like yesterday.