The Thanksgiving Without Cranberry Sauce

November 9, 1959, will never be forgotten by those in the cranberry business. It's referred to as "Black Monday," and it was destined to change the industry and many other things . . .

by Tim Clark

When they met November 20, 1959, in Hanson, Massachusetts, to discuss the future of the industry, directors of Ocean Spray drank a toast — cranberry juice, of course — in defense of their livelihood: (left to right) *Norman Holmes, Canada; James Olson, Oregon; William Haines, New Jersey; Carroll Griffith, Massachusetts; Bert Leasure, Wisconsin.*

□ THE CRANBERRY GROWERS OF CAPE Cod called it "Black Monday." Some of them, those old enough to remember, still do.

It was November 9, 1959 — 17 days before Thanksgiving. The nation's growers had harvested a record crop of the brilliant red fruit — almost one and a quarter million 100-pound barrels, half of them grown in Massachusetts. Packers and processors had been working overtime since September, and already four million cases of berries had been delivered to grocery store shelves in the form of fresh berries and cranberry sauce.

But that Monday, in Washington, D.C., Dr. Arthur S. Flemming, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, called a press conference to announce that a number of cranberries grown on the West Coast had apparently been contaminated with the residue of a weed-killing chemical called aminotriazole. The chemical, Flemming said, had been found in laboratory tests to cause thyroid cancer in rats. He advised consumers not to buy berries grown in Oregon or Washington, and outlined a major effort by the Food and Drug Administration to test other berries for chemical residues.

But what if shoppers had no way of knowing in which states their berries were grown, asked one reporter. "To be on the safe side," Flemming replied, "I'd pass them up."

With those words, Flemming instantly wrecked the cranberry market in 1959, and crippled the industry for years to come. Grocers across the country removed cranberries, fresh, frozen, and canned, from their shelves, and restaurants took them off the menu. State and city health officials called for voluntary suspension of sales or outright bans. In South Wareham, Massachusetts, cranberry grower Melville Beaton closed his processing plant and laid off his 250 workers, with 50 carloads of berries still in his warehouse.

A bitter scientific and political controversy was ignited. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, whose department had cleared aminotriazole for use after five years of testing, said he planned to eat cranberries for Thanksgiving as usual, but the Department of Agriculture cafeteria took cranberry-apple pie off its menu. American Cyanamid, one of the companies that made aminotriazole, declared that tests on dogs had proved no ill effects, and that a human being would have to eat 15,000 pounds of cranberries per day for years in order to get the same dosages as the laboratory rats. And officials of Ocean Spray Cranberries, the Massachusetts cooperative that controlled 80 percent of the fruit sold in America, denounced the HEW Secretary's action. There was not a shred of evidence, said Ocean Spray general manager Ambrose Stevens, that aminotriazole was dangerous to human beings. He warned Flemming that he was "killing a thoroughbred in order to destroy a single flea."

Cranberry growers were livid. The Massachusetts Farm Bureau immediately sent a telegram to President Eisenhower demanding that Flemming be fired. Ten thousand Bay State residents gathered at a Plymouth radio station to drink a thousand gallons of cranberry juice in defiance of Flemming's statement.

Contestants for the 1960 presidential campaign also got into the act. At a dinner in Wisconsin, the second-largest cranberry-growing state, Vice-President Richard Nixon ate four helpings of sauce, while in another part of the state, John F. Kennedy quaffed cranberry juice at every opportunity.

The press had a field day. "Mercy, Ma! No Cranberries?" was the headline on *Life*'s photo essay, while *Time* dubbed the controversy "The Cranberry Boggle." Cartoonists drew turkeys wondering if they could be put on the proscribed list and small boys writing to Secretary Flemming asking that he take a closer look at spinach. The holiday angle was played to death, and the political and economic aspects of the story were given close scrutiny. But there was relatively little reporting of the scientific side, reflecting a less sophisticated press corps and the still-prevailing view of science as a producer of wonders and beacon of progress. The American public was not yet accustomed to linking its health with that of laboratory rats.

But there were cautionary notes. One *New York Times* story reported that government researchers "have long been aware that an episode such as that of the tainted cranberries could break out, because of the tremendous growth of pesticides and their use since World War II." Production of synthetic organic pesticides had almost quintupled between 1947 and 1958, it noted. When the *Times* at first chided Secretary Flemming for going too far, it got a stinging letter from Dr. David Rutstein, head of the Department of Preventive Medicine at Harvard, who defended the HEW Secretary's action. "It is appalling," Dr. Rutstein wrote, "to read the irresponsible statements of prominent politicians on the cranberry question. Blithely ignorant of the biological facts, they seek votes and curry favor by drinking cranberry juice in public in the spirit of juvenile bravado and adult delinquency."

The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare reported that mail was running seven-to-one in favor of Flemming. "There are a lot of unanswered questions," wrote one correspondent. "Is (aminotriazole) present in

(continued on page 198)

THE THANKSGIVING WITHOUT CRANBERRY SAUCE

(continued from page 309)

the meat of grazing animals? Is it on pears, apples? Doesn't the average consumer ingest a significantly higher amount of chemicals than anyone realizes?"

By Thanksgiving Day, *The New York Times* had changed its editorial position so far as to condemn "the promiscuous use of toxic chemicals in American agriculture." Noting that more than a billion pounds of chemicals were annually spread on American crops and fields, the *Times* said, "It is a shocking thing that their use is permitted while we are still in ignorance of the long-range damage they may do."

The day after Thanksgiving, newspapers ran photographs of Secretary Flemming eating government-approved cranberries with his turkey. A lot of other politicians followed suit, though the White House was silent on the presidential dinner selections. Elsewhere, confusion over the safety of the fruit still reigned. In Sing Sing prison, the inmates were served turkey with grape jelly. American soldiers stationed in Europe were given cranberry sauce, but those in Japan had to do without. The government had cleared more than 16 million pounds of cranberries before Thanksgiving, but only a fraction of them ended up on American dinner plates. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture estimated on December 5 that less than 20 percent of its crop had been sold, and in Massachusetts, Ocean Spray president George Olsson predicted that 60 to 75 percent of the crop would go to waste, with losses as high as $30 million to the growers.

By Christmas, the second great traditional cranberry-buying season, the Food and Drug Administration had certified more than 22,000 tons of berries for sale, but it was the same story. "These days, when you say cranberries, people think of cancer," said one bitter West Coast grower. "They're going to associate those two words for a long time."

He was right. In spite of the fact that less than one half of one percent of the 1959 crop was seized as contaminated, and despite Agriculture Department efforts to promote Easter as "Cranberry Time," the cranberry market had been virtually wiped out, and the damage would last for years. Eventually the government paid about $8.5 million dollars to growers unable to sell clean berries, but the indemnity barely covered production costs. The 1960 crop was another record-breaker, but "an awful lot of it was dumped," says Dr. Chester Cross, head of the University of Massachusetts Cranberry Experiment Station in East Wareham, Massachusetts. Supply exceeded demand in 1961, too, so the growers, with government permission, withheld 12 percent of the 1962 crop, in order to stabilize prices. In that same year, Rachel Carson published *The Silent Spring,* an attack on the use of pesticides that eventually triggered the environmental movement.

It was 1977 before the cranberry growers were able to sell their full crop, Dr. Cross says, thanks to a smaller crop that year and the gradual fading of the bad memories. Prices went back up, and so did the harvests in 1978 and 1979. This year, another record crop was expected — two and a half million barrels, or twice the 1959 harvest. "The growers have got a little money for the first time in 20 years," says Dr. Cross, who has been at the Cranberry Station since 1937. "It's incredible. I'm so glad I lasted long enough to see it."

The recovery was due in large part to a turn-around at Ocean Spray. It had learned from the 1959 disaster that it could not afford to remain dependent on a two-month selling season. The management decided to invest more heavily in juice products, and sell them aggressively on a year-round basis. Gross sales went from $23 million in 1961, almost all of it fresh berries and sauce, to more than $230 million in 1980, 70 percent of that from fruit juices.

But in some ways the cranberry industry has changed forever. Productivity is much higher per acre now, but there are fewer acres in cultivation, and ownership is more concentrated. In 1956, there were 962 growers in Massachusetts. Today there are less than 500. "The smaller growers were forced out, or just decided to chuck it," Dr. Cross says. "We had a long, hard job convincing people that we had not tried to poison them."

The cranberry cancer scare of 1959 was a forerunner, an early warning of similar controversies yet to come. More and more substances have since been identified as possible cancer-causing agents, provoking the same sort of debates over what is safe, and how much is dangerous. The cranberry crisis showed that government efforts to avert a possible health hazard could have devastating economic impact. The scientific and political arguments are still going on.

Aminotriazole, the chemical weedkiller that started the fuss, is still being used — but not by cranberry growers. The industry has never forgotten "Black Monday" and the Thanksgiving without cranberry sauce. ■■

A SHORT COURSE IN COW-CATCHING

(continued from page 119)

got thirsty, we'd ask Violet to refill our glass with a "little more Tate, please."

Thus we had four separate ways of persuading a cow to return home in that bygone era. In the past 50 years, new methods may have been developed, but they can be only variations on the basic four.

Pigs were something else again. They had no handles to grab. Moreover, they were smarter than cows. No pig would have let a youngster use that ABC technique more than once. He'd have figured it out. His ploy was to coax his pursuer into following him into what appeared to be a trap, and then turning abruptly and speeding in the opposite direction. You could lunge at him as he dashed by, but unless you were lucky and caught a leg, he would be gone.

A pig on the loose required teamwork. With four or five people beating the underbrush, shouting advice, commands, and accusations, a pig generally