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Established 1819

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1917-21 Westminster Street
Olneyville Square

EMPIRE-ABORN BRANCH
Between Westminster and Washington Sts.

Open all business days and Tuesday evenings
5 to 8:30. Olneyville Branch open
Saturday evenings also.

"The Old Stone Bank"

THE J. C. HALL CO., PROV., R. I.

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Corn Husking Days



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

October 10, 1932

Corn Husking Days

*"Backward, turn backward, Oh time in thy
flight,
Make me a child again just for tonight,"*

wrote the poet, but it is safe to say that this wish was not expressed until after he had attended a typical, old-fashioned corn husking. These delightfully genuine merrymaking events, together with quilting parties and straw rides, have gone forever from the lives of our rural neighbors and their city cousins, and it is likely that few youngsters of the present generation have even heard of those exciting occasions when folks gathered from far and near to husk the corn in return for an evening of jollity and refreshment. Nevertheless, corn huskings were important and eagerly anticipated events in the early days of New England, and particularly in Old South County, when brisk Fall evenings would find laughing, singing parties on their way along the Post Road from Westerly or from Providence to gather with groups from other sections of the state at some farm where a great pile of corn awaited husking at the hands of willing guests.

Undoubtedly, many can still remember husking ears in the corn field or under a long open shed, and the rough



riding over country roads in a dead axle lumber wagon. And too, many of the present age can probably recall the mad stampede for the kitchen stove in the farmhouse when the last ear of corn had been husked and it was time to thaw out benumbed fingers and to attend to well-whetted appetites. But these are now but pleasant memories. Labor saving devices on the farms, the passing of horse-drawn vehicles and the complete transference of entertainment attractions from the quiet countryside to the livelier centers of population have relegated corn huskings and similar pastimes to the quaint pages of local folk-lore. In the "Journal of Thomas B. Hazard" otherwise known as "Nailer Tom's Diary" and which is the published diary of that interesting character who lived in Kingstown, Rhode Island, several references to "huskings" are found. In November, 1792, Nailer Tom recorded that he "Went up in the woods to Carry Marks Diner but he had gorn to Thomas Shearmans Husking". Thus it is evident that the custom originated early in the history of Rhode Island, and that it existed until within the memory of many who still recollect some of the following incidents generally associated with those frosty evenings when much

hard labor was gratuitously performed for the gracious host who offered nothing more than the customary refreshments, an hour or two of harmless parlor games, and a generous sprinkling of "red ears" in a mountain of "yellow ones".

First arrivals for a typical Rhode Island corn husking would usually appear about seven o'clock in the evening and the host would be kept busy with a lantern guiding the folks through the bar-ways and up the drive to the barn where the carriages and buggies would unload passengers and the horses were blanketed for the evening. After condition of crops, the weather, politics and kindred subjects had been discussed briefly, the women-folks would withdraw to the kitchen to supervise the laying out of the chinaware for use in the immediate future, and the men would retire to the corn heap to place lanterns here and there where they would do the most good. With giggles and laughter from the girls and more boisterous yells from the boys and the young men, the merry throng would assemble quickly from all directions, crowd through the kitchen door and surround the stove. After a few minutes for warming frost-bitten fingers and toes and for conquering the chill that

creeps upon a body after driving through the country on a cold night someone would suggest action and then there would be a mad rush out through the darkness to the heap of corn.

Everyone went to work without urging. The ears were stripped from the corn stalks, the husks pulled from the corn and, if it happened to be a yellow ear, it would be tossed upon the pile, while the husks were thrown in the opposite direction back of the workers. If the ear happened to be a red one, then proceedings would be temporarily interrupted, for thereby lay the secret of this curious custom of having energetic workers ready to perform a disagreeable task without any thought of remuneration, that is, on the part of the host. Here and there among the pile of stalks and husks flying fingers would come upon a bright red stalk bearing red husks and a scramble among the more youthful members of the crowd for possession would be made with the result that the victor usually found, to his bitter disappointment, that the red husks enclosed a golden ear. In the dim light shed by the smoky lanterns, it was difficult to distinguish the red ears from the golden, but when some youth finally

did discover and positively identify one of the coveted brilliant prizes, he would lose no time in announcing his good fortune. Holding high this symbol of special privilege, he would rush, football fashion, at the nearest girl, and greet her with a resounding smack amid a perfect bedlam of shouts and yells from the rest of the gathering. Before the girl could recover from her surprise, the enthusiastic youngster was probably repeating the kissing performance with the rest of the girls who generally protested that he was not playing fair. Quite often he would not be playing fair, for it was no secret in those days that many a red ear was held over for another season when it might even be expected to do double duty during the course of an evening of corn husking.

Whenever one of the young ladies discovered a red ear she was immediately pounced upon by the young gentlemen present. Under ordinary rules at a corn husking she was granted the privilege of choosing among those in the company, the one she wished to collect the reward, but on many occasions when everybody knew everybody else, she was quite as apt to be kissed by all of the young men present as by one. There should be no doubt left in

any person's mind as to the secret of corn husking popularity. It was good, wholesome natural fun and it brought young people together amid pleasant surroundings and in a spirit of gaiety, good fellowship and hospitality all of which were thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated in the earlier, simpler days of New England life.

Husking corn in the open had a tendency to sharpen the appetite. When the last ear had been thrown upon the towering pile, no time was lost in hurrying to the farmhouse where lunch would be served quickly and in generous quantities. How those youngsters would consume the sandwiches made from thick slices of crisp-crust ed homemade bread and delicately tinted ham, the chocolate cake, the heavily frosted orange cake, the freshly-fried doughnuts, the sweet pickles, the delicious pumpkin pie, the cottage cheese, the coffee and the sweet cider!

After full justice had been done to the supply of refreshments, the party would move into the sitting room where the chairs were usually placed in a circle around the sides of the room. Old fashioned games played for generations in this part of the land would be enjoyed for an hour or two. "Copenhagen", "Going to Jerusalem", "Spin

the Platter", "Clap in and Clap Out", "Forfeits" and many other parlor games, not omitting "Post Office", of course, and all dear to the hearts of many for years back of years were interspersed with practical jokes which under ordinary conditions would certainly have provoked anger.

It was long after midnight when a corn husking party would break up. All the folks would wrap themselves in sweaters, heavy coats and mittens, pass in single file before the host and hostess and thank them profusely for the pleasant evening and the fine refreshments. Under starlit skies the gathering would rapidly separate into small groups; the single carriages would rattle off into the darkness one after another; and the young folks from Wakefield, Wickford, Warwick or some other place in Rhode Island, might pile into a huge open wagon as the driver gave strict orders for them to sit, "first a fellow, and then a girl". Perhaps the old wagon would groan beneath the weight as turned from the drive into the highway, and as the melody of "Aunt Dinah's Quilting Party" and "Good Night Ladies" grew fainter in the distance, the members of the household probably sat down in the kitchen to discuss the event and

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observe how happy they were, blessed with the bountiful gifts of Nature and the love of many friends.

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent
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ADDRESS

"THE OLD STONE BANK"
86 South Main Street
Providence



THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank," is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

"THE OLD STONE BANK"