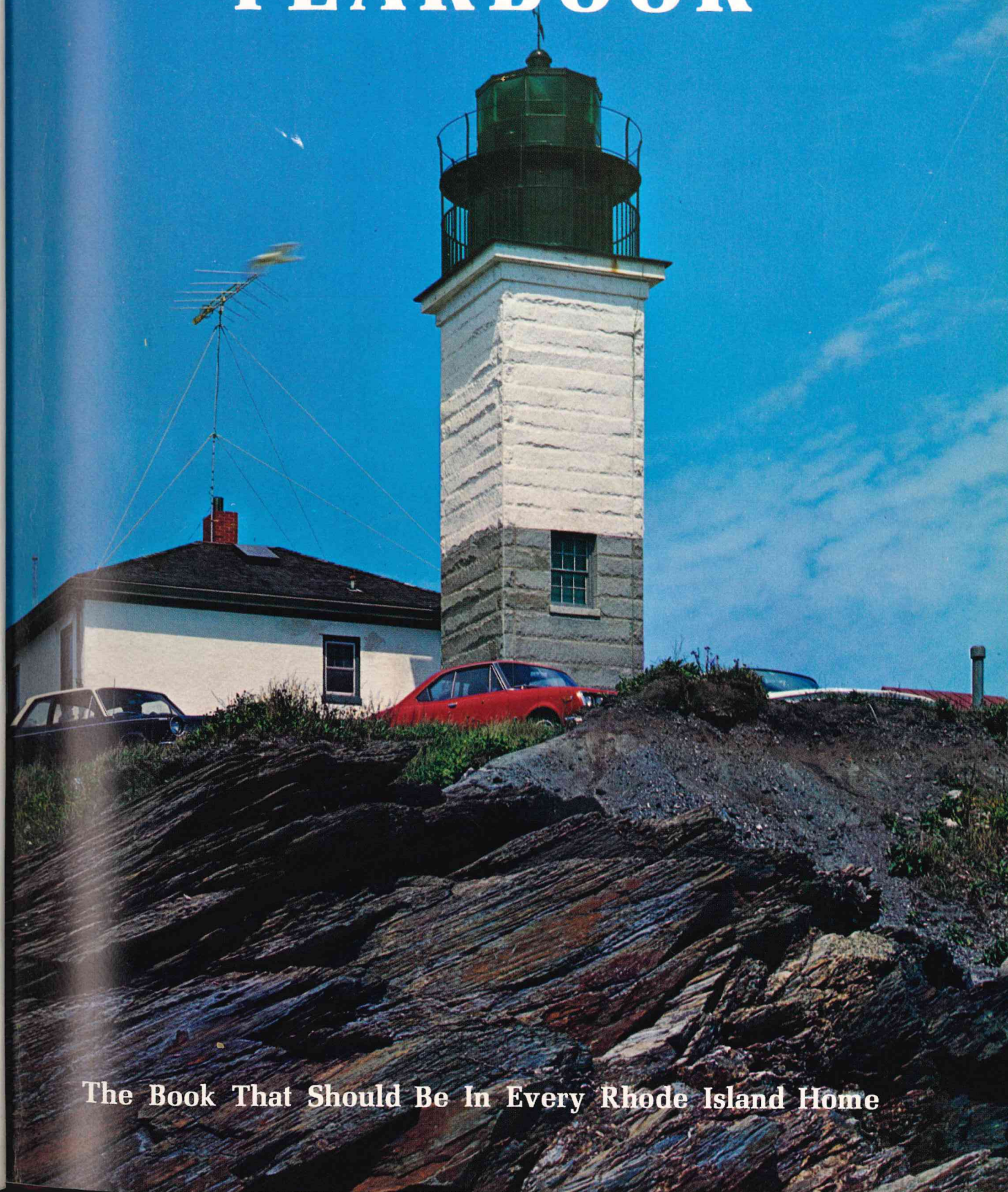


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RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



The Book That Should Be In Every Rhode Island Home

*The Coventry
Cranberry Bog
Greene
Rhode Island*



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Cranberries Galore

BY RICHARD L. CHAMPLIN

NEAR the quiet village of Greene lies a tract of seventy-six acres given over entirely to the cultivation of the cranberry. This bog contains the largest acreage of any single cranberry bog in the Northeast. In peak years it may yield five or six thousand barrels of the bouncing red berries, and has a potential for producing even more. A history of growing the traditionally American berry there gives in capsule form the history of cranberry culture, itself.

Possibly this bog originated as an abandoned beaver meadow; tradition has it that one of the dams was called the Beaver Dam. Remnants of the once extensive white cedar swamp bear out the record that where the bog is now situated the first settlers felled virgin cedar trees, opening the swamp to the light of day and inviting the spread of wild cranberries. In any event, by 1728 Surveyor William Greene had platted the valued cranberry bog to seventeen owners whose right it was to harvest the wild fruit each on his own sector. Perhaps this arrangement worked well at first. Doubtless it did not with the second generation owners who couldn't tell where, in the sameness of an open bog, their claim ended and their neighbor's began. The legal tangle resulted in a settlement by which the Town of Coventry took over the bog, hoping to defray the expenses of its poor with the proceeds earned by the cranberry crop.

Meanwhile Henry Hall at Dennis on Cape Cod had experimented with cultivating the cranberry to produce better yields. Following his lead, Abiel Sampson, who in 1862 bought the bog from the town, practiced true cran-


berry culture, discarding wild cranberries in favor of new cultivated varieties. The bog, after passing through ownership by several parties, now operates under the Coventry Cranberry Company, owned by Robert W. ("Win") Leonard and the Greene Corporation, composed of members of the Arnold family.

Water supply always played an important part in cranberry growing. It still does, but in a different way. Traditionally when frost threatened the ripening berries in autumn, the pond upstream from the bog was opened to flood the bog for the night. According to the latest practice, when the forecast calls for frost on the cranberry bogs, the workers spray the berries with a fine mist of clear water to ward it off. The Coventry bog is equipped to do this. Harvesting was formerly accomplished either by hand-picking — tedious and slow at best — or by scoop and a special small hand device called a snapper. At that period as many as one hundred workers gathered at the bog working in teams assigned to various bays, and they toiled from dawn to dark. The berries were carried off the bog by boys, sometimes schoolboys or helpers from the Adult Correctional Institution. Now by contrast in the September and October harvest, a mere twelve men operating five picking machines and other equipment gather the crop. After the harvest in the old days, the bog was flooded to float all the loose berries, and they were herded together in booms like logs, and brought ashore to dry. Modern efficiency eliminates this step.

Every third winter the workers move out on the

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flooded, frozen bog to sand the vines. They deposit about a half inch of sand, which when the ice melts, falls onto the vines, causing long runners to root at intervals and hence to blossom more profusely. Should an area need replanting in the spring, a special cutting machine shears off a plot of healthy vines. This makes cuttings which still another machine plants on the poorer site, with no harm to the cut vines. They grow out all over again. Varieties now grown include Early Black and Howes.

The blossoming plants once depended on wild bees to pollinate them. The yield is now increased by introducing hives on site when the pink, beaked flowers open. This interesting phase of cranberry culture takes place in late June when Beekeeper Arthur Payne of Chepochet transports fifty hives of bees, Italian and Caucasian, to the bog-side. In good years each hive will make as many as thirty-five to forty pounds of honey. The very vines that produce the tangy, acid berry, by contrast yield also through their blossoms the sweet cranberry honey.

Like other commercial bogs in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Wisconsin, this bog took charge of winnowing its own berries to separate them from the debris scooped up with them. They also bounced them to sort the sound from the unsound berries. Now, by arrangement with the principal cranberry company which buys the entire crop, the berries are shipped straight to Cape Cod where the winnowing and culling take place.

Surely the biggest single asset on any such operation consists of a good foreman, and Coventry Cranberry Company has one in the person of Ralph Theroux, a veteran cranberry man with forty-two years experience under his hat. One bleak day in February Ralph gave me a grand tour of the bog. We set out in his pick-up truck over the narrow dirt roads that divide the bog, viewing the level acres submerged under inches of ice. He grinned as he told me, "There are two miles of road to cover before we get back." A typical season, he ex-

plained, starts on March 15th when the water is drained off. We saw the ditches and pumps for doing the job. Sand for the vines comes from the adjacent low hills. Whitford Pond lays off to the north and Great Grass Pond to the east; there is water aplenty here, and Ralph cannot recall a shortage of it ever! Cedar trees step up to the very edge of Great Grass Pond, and in the swamp beyond according to tradition several deserters from the Civil War hid out. Beyond the south rim of the bog my guide pointed to an old burying ground. After passing young nursery stock, thousands of evergreens set out by a former owner, we completed the circuit.

A large sliding door (painted almost cranberry red) let us into the cranberry barn, where at once the eye picked out traces of the old and the new — the newest machines for cultivating, cutting, planting and harvesting the precious berries; and the time-honored scoops hanging in rows on the wall next to several midget scoops called snappers. Down one flight of stairs we stepped into a room where the bouncing equipment now stands idle. Ralph talked in the past tense as he described how the good berries used to be separated from the poor by this bouncer and then hand-sorted by a crew of women. Both practices are discontinued here now. Yet the equipment still stands there unmanned and gives the whole barn a museum atmosphere. This is how it was done, my guide told me, and I could almost flash back to historic times. In fact, the entire two hundred fifty year history of the bog sped by in a few moments there at the grounds of the Coventry Cranberry Company where a whole new crop of cranberries lay ready to spring forth.

Mock Cherry Pie

A touch of Yankee ingenuity and thrift handed down for three generations.

1 cup cranberries
½ cup raisins
Chop together coarsely
Add: 1 cup of sugar
½ cup water
1 rounded tablespoon flour

Mix all above ingredients and bring to a boil. Simmer three to four minutes. Remove from heat and cool.

Add: 1 teaspoon vanilla

While filling is cooling make pastry following instructions for your favorite two-crust pie.

Pour cooled filling mixture into unbaked pie shell. Cover with remaining pastry.

Bake at 425° for 10 minutes. Reduce heat to 375° for remainder of baking — approx. 20 to 30 minutes.

Cranberry blossoms

