

# Bergen Strawberry Center In Allendale, Ramsey Area

By JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

Wild strawberries brightened the hills of New Jersey when the first colonists arrived. Revolutionary War soldiers breaking out of winter camps at Morristown feasted hungrily on the toothsome fruit, and children walking the fields knew the joys of the June berry.

Nevertheless, it took market-minded Bergen County farmers of the early 19th century to make the free-growing berry a delicacy to tempt the leanest of pocketbooks.

It began simply enough soon after 1800, when Hackensack laborers picked wild strawberries for the New York City market. They sold their fruit from home-made splint baskets hung on poles across their shoulders. As they walked the streets of downtown New York, the strawberry vendors sang: "Berries! Berries! Bergen berries!"

Housewives joyfully heeded their sales talk, bought them out, and begged for more.

Bergen farmers, long attuned to the desires of the New York market, took it from there. They selected the best of the wild plants, cross-bred and fertilized them, and by 1840 had developed bigger and redder varieties, including the Hauboy and the noted Scotch Runner.

## Strawberry Wild

Thereafter, for more than 50 years, the upper parts of Bergen and Passaic counties went strawberry wild every June.

Farmers at first catered only to New York. They loaded wagons high with baskets of strawberries, drove northward to the docks at Piermont, N. Y. and transferred the fruit to sloops headed for the New York docks. Growers went along as their own salesmen, often leaving their teams tied to the Piermont docks for a day or two.

The coming of the Erie Railroad in the 1840's did two things: it heightened the strawberry pace and it transferred the fruit from Hackensack to the Ramapo Valley near Ramsey and Allendale.

More than 400,000 baskets of strawberries left Bergen on the first Erie fruit trains during June, 1846. A year later the Erie returned with its strawberry specials, putting on nine cars for berries and two cars for the berry-growers who still went to New York to sell their fruit. Often one train carried 80,000 baskets of strawberries.

However, the well-to-do in Paterson and Newark both demanded their share, and by 1850 wagonloads of strawberries rolled to markets in those cities.

The Paterson Guardian especially appreciated the festive tone that strawberries gave. In 1857 it predicted, "Paterson will always be the Strawberry City of the World."

Night after night the strawberries moved out of Bergen County. The Bergen Journal in 1858 reported that 170 wagons containing 221,000 baskets of strawberries passed over the Bergen Turnpike in one night.

## 1,500,000 Baskets

During the last week in June of 1858, 1,100 wagons piled with 1,500,000 baskets of strawberries passed through the Turnpike toll gates. One a half million baskets of strawberries is big business in any age—and that was only on the Bergen Turnpike.

Strawberry time brought hundreds of itinerants to upper Bergen County. Buyers and commission merchants came to haggle with growers. Pickers, sometimes a full family of them, flocked into Ramsey and Allendale to harvest the berries at a cent per half pint basket, plus board.

Berry sellers, commission merchants, and pickers sweated and haggled and worked until the trains and wagons moved out of town, then hastened to local establishments for refreshments—anything but strawberry ice cream. Sherwood and Tallman's Hotel at Allendale knew all-night revelry. Nearby, Charlie May set up a bar in his general store for the overflow.

After the Civil War the Erie did



TAKING ADVANTAGE of nature's free gift, farmers in the 1800's, assisted by their wives and children, pick and pack the wild strawberries so plentiful on New Jersey hills. The luscious berries were peddled in New York City where vendors roamed the streets calling "Berries! Berries! Bergen Berries!" It wasn't until the wild berry supply dwindled that farmers started cultivating the early spring treat. A few strawberry farms still exist in the County but most have yielded to the Bergen building boom.

(Tercentenary Photo)

its best to encourage the berry-men. They built special box cars, painted them white and placed them in Allendale and Ramsey depots at noon. Long lines of strawberry wagons spread outward each day, with those last in line ruefully aware that prices might drop so much during the afternoon that a day's picking would bring little.

Alas for Bergen and alas for Paterson as the Strawberry City. The railroads ruined what they helped to create. Erie trains encouraged buyers in outlying areas to produce strawberries, too. Most important, Erie trains brought in swarms of people so eager to live in Bergen that they paid high prices for the strawberry patches and turned them into building lots.

Strawberry emphasis shifted elsewhere—to the Hilton area of Maplewood and Irvington, for example, in the 1870's and 1880's. Gone from Bergen by 1900 were the growers, the pickers, and the wagonloads of ripe, red fruit. Gone was the make-shift bar from Charlie May's general store.

Gone, forever, were the strawberry dreams, replaced by much less satisfying memories.

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