

Autumn - a time for fresh apples and sweet cider

SEPT. 27, 1980

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

Autumn in New England with its frosty nights, its clear, crisp days, its bright foliage, and its bountiful harvest, is truly a rewarding season. And one of the rewards is its apple crop. This firm, round, succulent fruit has been a favorite for generations. As fresh fruit and in puddings, pies, and apple butter, the pioneer housewife could enhance an otherwise dull fare with nutritious variety.

Many varieties of apples have been developed over the years. Those we find in the stores and on roadside stands today were unknown to our grandparents, while the varieties they cherished are no longer available. For nearly 100 years the outstanding favorite throughout New England was the Baldwin apple, discovered and propagated by the first superintendent of the Middlesex Canal, Loammi Baldwin. While in Wilmington as a member of the surveying party laying out the route of the canal from Chelmsford to Boston, Baldwin saw woodpeckers vigorously assailing the fruit of a wild apple tree. The apples were tart, juicy and of a firmness that presaged good keeping qualities. He was so impressed with them that he planted them in his own orchard and gave away many scions for grafting onto existing trees.

So popular was the apple pie, it became a symbol of true Americanism along with motherhood and the American flag.

The fruit also provided apple cider, a popular beverage which could be served either fresh or as mulled cider, i.e. cider that has been heated with spices added, or it could be allowed to age slightly to produce "hard cider," the result of fermentation. History tells us that two barrels of cider were provided for the use of the council at the ordination of the Rev. Hezekiah Packard in 1793 and the will of Willard Parker, in 1804, provided that his wife shall have, among other things, "six barrels of Cyder yearly and every year."

In order to assure a supply of this "nectar of the Gods," many farmers built cider mills on their farms, which also provided an outlet for their surplus and bruised fruit. Some of these cider mills developed into commercial operations, serving not only their own needs but those of their neighborhood as well.

One such mill was located on the Perham farm on Westford Street. Built by David Perham in 1835 on land that had been in the family ever since John Perham settled there in 1664, the mill was operated for more than 100 years by David and three succeeding generations. The buildings finally fell the victims of "progress" when they were razed to make way for Interstate 495.

The original cider mill was in a 100 by 70 foot barn. Apples were shoveled into a grinder that was powered by a 2-horsepower "engine," that is, two horses on a treadmill. The chopped apples were then pressed to extract the juice. This was a slow and arduous task requiring the efforts of several men. In those days the necessary pressure was applied by a hickory press-screw, five feet long and six or eight inches in diameter, that was manually rotated by crossbars that passed through one end of the screw. Straw was used as a filter medium through which the juice flowed on its way to the storage barrels.

About 1885, Henry S. Perham erected a new cider mill a short distance from the old one greatly increasing productivity. Four or five men operating the electric grinder, hydraulic press and conveyor needed only about four or five hours to equal the production of 15 men working all day with the old equipment.

At the new mill, apples that had been dumped into the receiving bin from the wagon of the local orchardist were carried upstairs on a conveyor belt to the grinder. The grated apples were discharged through a hole in the floor and deposited on a flat truck on the first floor. The workmen then made what they called a "cheese," layers of apple separated by pressing cloths and slatted wooden frames. When the "cheese" layers reached a height of three to four feet, the truck was pushed across to the press on tracks and hydraulic pressure of 200 tons was applied. The apple juice ran out from between and down through the wooden separating frames into a trough below the floor which led to any one of three wooden tanks in the cellar, each with a capacity of 1000 gallons. In order to clear the liquid, it was pumped upstairs again and through a revolving cylinder of aluminum wire mesh, and back to the cellar into a clean tank.

Much of the cider was pumped into barrels or packaged in glass jugs for sale as fresh cider but a large quantity was converted to vinegar. This took about three years. Fermentation took place for about a year in two 50,000 gallon tanks, and then the liquid was pumped off into one of many hogsheads for two more years of standing. The high quality of Perham vinegar is obvious from the fact that it was purchased by S.S. Pierce Company in Boston, one of the more discriminating grocers.

While the spread of suburbia has all but eliminated the apple trees of Chelmsford, this delicious fruit along with fresh apple cider is still available. Without them autumn in New England would be just another dull season.