

The Annual Red-letter Day
of
Early Belmont

In the early part of the 19th century, the inhabitants of this community were almost wholly descendents of the English colonists, and it is interesting to note that when I was a child, it was not at all unusual to hear the words hisin and hersn instead of his and hers. Was this a lingering trace of our Saxon ancestry? This has long been a region of prosperous farms and market-gardens closely associated with Faneuil Hall Market. For many years it has been noted, not only for its fine vegetables, but its fruits, especially its strawberries. Tradition tells us that more than a century ago, people used to drive out from Boston to be served with strawberries and cream, to be eaten beneath the shade of the great elm on Pleasant Street. In the early days of Belmont the outstanding social event of the year was the Strawberry Festival. And I find, in a journal

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written at the time, that the first mention of one is on June 25th, 1859. It was given in the vestry of the Unitarian Church, which stood where Marcy's coal yard is at present [site of Belmont's Post Office, Concord Ave.]. We had become incorporated as a town three months before and we were flushed with the joy of achievement. Our first festival must be a success and we worked together with the will to make it so. Throughout the morning contributions poured in; strawberries from the farms, flowers from the gardens, food from the homes—at noon the preparations were completed. At two o'clock the door was thrown open to the public. Admission 25 cts. The strawberries arranged in baskets, were placed on long tables, with here and there a display of roses or other flowers, and hand bouquets all very pleasing. The berries were fine, and Mr. Hovey, the originator of Hovey's Seedling, who was there said that he had never seen such large ones anywhere. Mr. J. O. Wellington had the finest and largest (which were of the variety). One of which measured 5 inches around. This won the first prize of five dollars. The second prize was for a basket of Brighton Pines, awarded to J. Willard Hill.

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Fourteen prizes were given in all, and great interest was shown in the exhibit. After a while, the door of the Agricultural Library, belonging to the Farmers' Club, was thrown open and a bountiful feast was served to all. On a table nearby strawberries and cream and ice cream were for sale at 10 cts. a saucer. At nine o'clock the prize berries were sold at auction. The first prize basket bringing \$6.50. Such was our first Strawberry Festival. Simple, perhaps, but enjoyed so much by all that it was repeated, year after year with ever increasing popularity.

In 1862, the Secretary of the committee chosen from the Farmers' Club states in his report that "considerable difficulty was experienced for want of room for the exhibition."

The next year (1863) at the meeting of the Farmers' Club in June 13th, Wm J. Underwood was chosen Chairman of the Committee of the Strawberry Festival. Samuel P. _____ Treasurer and Secretary. The members of the Club elected to be the head of the various committees were as follows: Richards Richardson, William H. Lock, E. B. Grant, Francis B. Yates, Wm J. Underwood, John G. Smith, J. Willard Hill,

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Samuel Hatch, C. M. Atkinson, Warren Heustis, John Hogan, and George V. Fletcher was "requested" to be the Ticket Seller. Contributions of flowers and corporation of citizens generally were respectfully requested.

This year a new note was struck. No longer were they to be limited by the walls of the church vestry, they were to have room to expand – room for greater achievements. Land close by the church owned by Eleazer Homer, was hired for a week. Men were put to work and soon the ground was cleared and leveled and a fence was built around it. A large Yale tent 65 x 115 feet was hired, and the smaller 16 x 16 feet. Four new flags were obtained to grace the occasion. Edmund's full band was engaged together, with an omnibus to convey the musicians to and from the city.

Three policemen were hired from Cambridge for half a day. An extra train to Boston on the Fitchburg Railroad at 8:30 p.m. was charter. Two silver goblets valued at \$50 were purchased from Shreve, Stanwood, and Co to be offered as first and second prizes for the best exhibits of strawberries. Numerous

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other prizes were offered not only for strawberries, but for bouquets and floral displays. Copeland, a noted Boston's confectioner was to furnish the ice cream and cakes. Laurel was purchased for decoration. Cotton cloth was used as a covering for the tables, and it is interesting to note that it was 62 ½ cts. a yard, while 30 cts. a yard was paid for that purchased for the same purpose in 1859, showing the effect of the Civil War on the price of cotton.

The tents were set up. The baskets of strawberries, together with the numerous floral displays, were arranged on tables which were placed at one end of the tent, while at the other end was a table for strawberries and ice cream were to be had. The musicians were stationed at one side. Strawberries had been contributed from one end of the town to the other – from Varnum Frost on the east to the Chenery's on the west; from Thomas Morton, near the Heights to William Richardson near Fresh Pond. There were 57 entries for competition. At last all was ready – the day was perfect, and the

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fine estate of Samuel O. Meade, directly opposite the tent seemed to blend with the grounds and added a charm to the setting. Open houses were the order of the day and everyone seemed to be in holiday humor.

Soon after two o'clock, the hour of opening, people began to arrive from far and near, from the city and neighboring towns, some by train, but many in fine carriages, and _____ drawn by teams of horses. Handsomely dressed ladies, some with tiny parasols gave an air of elegance and beauty to the scene. A journal written at the time states that about 2000 people attended the festivities. Also, special trains were run from Boston and back again. Rows of seats had been arranged outside the tent and the musicians enlivened the occasion frequently with their fine music.

Early in the afternoon the prizes were awarded for the various exhibits of strawberries and flowers. The highest prize, a silver goblet, valued at \$30 for the finest exhibit was given to Alonzo Simpson. The second prize a silver goblet valued at \$20 was won by

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J.O. Wellington, who also won two other prizes. The berries in both cases were Hovey's Seedlings. The other awards were given in money. Five dollars being the amount for the first prizes, one of which was awarded to Varnum Frost, another to J.C. Cushing, and a third to Charles G. Winn for different varieties. The other prize winners were as follows: Thomas C. Morton, J. B. and C. H. Chenery, William H. Locke, Isaac Chenery, and Wm. Richardson.

For the best pair of bouquets, J. G. Cushing won the first prize of \$8.00. John Hogan, Mrs. Wm. J. Underwood, and Warren Heustis were also awarded prizes. J. G. Cushing had the best floral display. Mrs. E. B. Grant the second.

At six o'clock space in front of the band was cleared and the musicians played quadrilles for those who wished to dance. Many promptly availed themselves of the opportunity and the young ladies in their pretty dresses with their partners dancing in the handsomely decorated tent formed a charming picture enjoyed by all. At seven o'clock, fruit and flowers were sold at auction, the prize winners being sold first. Wm. J. Underwood proved himself a genial and successful

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auctioneer and good prices were attained for everything. At eight o'clock the sale was ended and the people well satisfied, began to take their departure.

Our venture had been a success in every way. A high standard had been set and was maintained for quite a number of years. It was this kind of a Strawberry Festival for which Belmont became noted and which lived long into the memories of those who took part and of those who came and shared with us the pleasures of the day.

Harriet A. Hill

April 15th, 1934