A FEW WORDS ABOUT CRANBERRY PRICES
A timeline of cranberry prices reflects fascinating market gyrations
by Mark Ehlenfeldt

A few words? Maybe just one word.
Wow!
It looks crazier than the stock market.
Sure, agricultural crops and their markets are expected to be variable since they are at the mercy of climate and weather, but big jumps (or big drops) usually have bigger underlying causes. And this chart has both big jumps AND big drops. Therein lay several stories. This timeline comes from New Jersey, but within several dollars plus-or-minus it is the timeline of the U.S. cranberry market. There were many events, but we’ll just look at just a few.

1) The Mid-forties
See that spike in the mid-forties? I originally asked a grower friend what he made of it. He assumed there was a lot of demand after the war. He was only partially right. There was a concurrence of events that caused the price spike (and it wasn’t all market forces). During WWII there were only limited amounts of agricultural chemicals available because of war allocations. Thus, in 1943, only 50,000 lb. of pyrethrum (insecticide) was available for cranberry growers, whereas in previous years 200,000 lbs. was a typical usage. In that year, in Massachusetts, it was estimated that 200,000 barrels were lost due to damage by root grub worm. All of this resulted in the smallest crop in 37 years; it was calculated to be about 36.5% less than the 1939-1943 average. Along with the reduced crop, 175,000 barrels were needed for government requirements, leaving only about 270,000 for public consumption. The booming industries of WWII spurred the buying power of the consuming public, and cranberry prices rose. Due to the short crop, high prices, and ultimately pressure from army, the Office of Price Administration (OPA) and the War Food Administration (WFA) established a price ceiling on fresh cranberries that continued for several years. Price ceiling values for the years 1943 to 1945 were $16.20, $24.20, and $19.40, respectively. One can safely assume that without these ceilings, prices would have skyrocketed even higher. 1946 was a terrific crop year, and with the end of the war there was less pressure from government purchases. Nonetheless, elevated purchasing power and pent-up demand of the public drove the unregulated prices of 1946 to $32.20 before they settled back to more typical pre-war levels.

2) The Aminotriazol Cancer Scare
A critical event in the history of cranberry production was the aminotriazol cancer scare. On November 9, 1959, at the peak of pre-thanksgiving cranberry sales, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare issued a press release that asserted that the U.S. cranberry crop was contaminated with aminotriazol, a broad-leaf herbicide that possibly caused thyroid cancer in mice. “No cranberries” was the order of the day in restaurants and markets. The market for 1959 was ruined; demand ceased to exist, and thousands of pounds of fresh berries and processed product were dumped. The USDA reported fresh cranberry sales for 1959 as zero. Little contamination was subsequently found in cranberry stocks, and even then, only from localized areas. Under a special federal program, cranberry growers were indemnified about $8.00 per barrel for losses, although $9.00 per barrel was listed as the official price. A Cranberry Marketing Order, a federally-chartered program, was created in response to this “cancer scare”. Ocean Spray led an industry effort to seek the order as a way to limit cranberry (continued on page 2)
production so as to accommodate the short-term reduction in demand. The order was administered via the Cranberry Marketing Committee (CMC), a grower committee that made recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture. Marketing orders continued for 3 years. The final order was implemented on August 15, 1962.

3) The Ocean Spray Juice Market

To digress a bit, the Ocean Spray Cooperative as we know it began in 1930 under the name Cranberry Canners Cooperative, but even at that early date was selling products under the name Ocean Spray.

What do you need to know about the Ocean Spray Cooperative? First, since it is a cooperative, it is owned by the growers. The goal of forming the cooperative was to regulate both supply and marketing, and foster demand to keep cranberry production profitable. Part of this process, was regulating the amount of acreage a grower could have in production. If you were in the coop, you didn’t receive your crop payment instantly, since the crop was pooled, and profits distributed equitably. Ocean Spray at its best controlled about 90% of production, and in the process stabilized prices and unified the marketing. Initially, its apparent impact on prices early on was not large. In more modern times, Ocean Spray has also supported research and product development, two critically important things to the continued growth of the market. However the outcome of this investment was that when there was high demand for the crop, a co-op member would almost certainly receive less for his crop than an independent grower, since members supported research, product development, and advertising, but in years when there was an oversupply, cooperative growers received better prices than independents, because Ocean Spray had sales contracts.

The real revolution for cranberries came with Ocean Spray’s development of the juice market. Juice products moved cranberries from a holiday item to a year-round commodity. The cranberry juice market effectively started in the mid-sixties with juice first being distributed nationally in 1964. Juice had been produced earlier, but was not marketed nationally in volume. One might assume that national distribution would result in a price increase. It seems to have resulted in a slight price bump, but the effect, if any, was slow, perhaps reflective of only modest volumes of distribution initially.

4) The Thorkilson Era, 1972 - 1987

Harold (Hal) Thorkilsen became CEO of Ocean Spray in 1972. He was an enormously successful CEO, moving the company from a modest cooperative with a recognized brand name to a Fortune 500 company that was a major player in the supermarket juice aisle. Thorkilsen had the reputation as a good manager with sound ideas, who also knew the value of research, development, and advertising. It was said that no agricultural cooperative even came close to the consumer-oriented media advertising by Ocean Spray during this period, when it was ranked among the top 50 food advertisers in the USA.

During Thorkilson’s tenure, the cooperative’s sales increased from $87 million to $736 million, and grower returns grew from $23 million to $207 million. However, the success of Ocean Spray also led to more competitors. The popularity of cranberry juice blends made it possible for independent processors to make inroads through private label sales that undercut Ocean Spray prices.

Because of the juice market, growing cranberries became very profitable and it was easy for the independent growers to expand their cranberry acreage. Ocean Spray’s market share of both cranberry deliveries and sales of cranberry products began to decline.

5) Mid-term Stability & New Markets and Products

Hal Thorkilson’s successor, John (Jack) Llewellyn Jr., came on the scene in 1988. During this period, prices remained at elevated levels as cranberry juice and juice blends remained popular, and as Ocean Spray continued to take full advantage of advertising. And it was in this era that sweetened dried cranberries (SDCs) became a viable product that Ocean Spray trademarked as Crasins™. SDCs were recognized as a valuable commodity because they more fully utilized cranberry fruit and increased profitability. One barrel (100 lbs.) of fresh cranberries yielded 50 lbs. of SDCs plus one gallon of cranberry juice concentrate. In the modern market, SDCs sell at retail for approximately $4 per pound. SDCs were regionally marketed as early as the late 1980s, but did not fully hit the national scene until about 10 years later. As SDCs took hold however, they became an important facet of the ongoing cranberry market.

The other new development of this era was nutriceuticals. It’s difficult to pin an exact date on when the promotion of cranberry juice for treating UTIs (urinary tract infections) became the rage, but the initial scientific papers leading to its use were published in the late 1980s. It is widely accepted that along with SDCs, nutriceuticals drove a steady demand for cranberries in this period.

In this era however, there were also ongoing defections from Ocean Spray. Demand was high and independent growers could command better prices by riding on the coattails of Ocean Spray research and advertising. Membership in co-op went from about 80% to approximately 60%.

6) Boom and Bust

While sales grew steadily during Llewellyn’s nine-year tenure, they did not match corporate projections. These projections had been used to schedule cranberry plantings to meet anticipated fruit needs, and when these needs did not materialize, inventories began to build. Nonetheless, in the 1990s, grower prices skyrocketed in response to both high demand and market disruptions caused by fruit shortages among some independent handlers. Prices peaked in 1996 when the New Jersey price was $61.80, but at this time,
some independents were getting as much as $80 per bbl. Such prices only encouraged more acreage and more production.

7) The Crash

The market receded slightly in 1997 (to $56.60), but 1998 and 1999 saw record cranberry crops. These oversupplies led to declines in prices, and the market fell hard. In 1998, prices had fallen to $26.30, and by 1999 to $10.10. The situation in 1999 was the result of the massive crop, a bleak sales outlook, tight competition among juice products, rapidly rising inventories, low projected prices, and increasing member attrition. It was estimated that the cost of production was about $35 a barrel. Thus, in these years some growers stopped farming; some dumped their crops; some found other jobs to support their families. The Cranberry Marketing Order, dormant since 1962 was once again invoked for volume regulation of the 2000 crop. In late March of 2000, the CMC approved a recommendation for a marketing allotment representing 85% of previous sales history for all U.S. growers. Prices began to recover. In March 2001, a similar allotment of 65% of sales history was recommended.

Growing conditions during 2001 were sub-par and many growers had limited operating capital to fund normal cultural practices because of large back-to-back losses. The market in essence became self-regulating at the extreme. In 2002, despite holding meetings, the CMC adjourned with no specific recommendation to the Secretary, and as a result no volume regulation was enacted. Since 2002, there has been no further consideration of utilizing the marketing order for volume control, and the marketing order has once again gone dormant.

8) The Present

Moving into the mid-2000s, demand was good, and prices recovered. In 2008, Ocean Spray encouraged both cooperative and independent growers to plant more acres for the projected needs of industry for growth of SDCs. The industry has, however, been blessed (or cursed) with good crops, leading once again to oversupply. U.S. production has risen from 6.8M barrels in 2010 to 8.5M barrels in 2014. In response to this oversupply, prices have declined from $60 to $45. It is said that this is a price that Ocean Spray would like to hold for co-op members. For independents however, prices have dropped as low as $10-15 per barrel. Juice sales are flat, but SDC sales (Crasins™) are growing. For 2014, Ocean Spray worked with the CMC to curb the surplus. The Committee settled on a voluntary 15% cut in production from 2013 levels. For its part, Ocean Spray views the key to its long-term success in the expansion of its national and especially international markets.

Many things have been written about the cranberry market. Referenced in the next column are several good accounts for those that want to know more.

References

American Agricultural Economics Association. 2003. The Cranberry Industry at the Crossroads (Graduate Student Case Study Competition). Arthur Capper Cooperative Center Case Study Series No. 03-01.
WHITESBOG EVENT SCHEDULE

For more information call (609) 893-4646, e-mail us at WhitesbogPreservationTrust@comcast.net or visit us on the web at www.whitesbog.org.

October

24 Moonlight Walk 7 p.m.
Harvest Moon. Listen to the night sounds of the Pines, learn about Whitesbog and experience the seasonal changes of the Pinelands. All walks are 3-5 miles in length, weather permitting and led by experienced leaders. $5 per person donation, reservations requested 609-893-4646

25 Harvest Tour & Antique Show 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Learn about Whitesbog’s founder and legendary cranberry grower, J.J. White, his daughter and blueberry innovator, Elizabeth C. White, and other residents of Whitesbog from scientists to berry pickers. Docents in period dress will guide you through the Village’s many museums and historic buildings. Shop for Antique tools, bottles, postcards, Toys and Collectables, while enjoying the reenactment of a 1920s Cranberry Harvest. Reservations for the 1 to 3 p.m. - 1920s Cranberry Harvest Tour are requested. $10 per person.

November

7 WPT Volunteer Workday 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Have fun with friends, working in the gardens, repairing trails, restocking the General Store and working around the Village. Lunch provided.

7 Whitesbog Village Tour 1 p.m.
Stroll the Historic Village, learn about Whitesbog’s history, and visit Suningive, Elizabeth White’s historic home, the worker’s cottages and other buildings of Whitesbog’s heritage. $5 donation per person, reservations requested.

21 Moonlight Walk 7 p.m.
Hunter Moon. Listen to the night sounds of the Pines, learn about Whitesbog and experience the seasonal changes of the Pinelands. Walks are 3 to 5 miles long, and led by experienced leaders. $5 donation per person, reservations requested.

December

5 Whitesbog Village Tour 1 p.m.
$5 donation/person. (See November 7).

5 WPT Volunteer Workday 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
(See November 7).

12 Whitesbog’s Winter Celebration 1 p.m.
$5 members, $7 non-members, by reservation. Enjoy a Nature walk and Candy-cane find with Santa’s helper, holiday arts & crafts for kids.

January

9 WPT Volunteer Workday 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
(See November 7).

9 Whitesbog Village Tour 1 p.m.
$5 donation/person. (See November 7).

18 MLK Day of Service 10 a.m.
Village clean-up, 609-893-4646 - weather permitting.

February

6 General Store Re-opens 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
The Store is open Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and by special request.

6 WPT Volunteer Workday 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
See October’s listing for details.

6 Whitesbog Village Tour 1 p.m.
$5 donation/person. (See November 7).

March

5 WPT Volunteer Workday 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
(See November 7).

5 Whitesbog Village Tour 1 p.m.
$5 donation/person. (See November 7).

6 The 6th Annual Lines in the Pines
Frog Rock Golf & Country Club, Hammonton, NJ Visit us at the Whitesbog Booth. FREE

19 Moonlight Walk 7 p.m.
Worm Moon. $5 donation per person, reservations requested. (See October 24 listing for details).

22 Living History Tours 1 p.m. – 3 p.m.
Reservations required. $10 donation per person.

2016 Events

20 General Store closes for the season 4 p.m.

27 Whitesbog’s Holiday Party 4:30 p.m.
Members only, reservations requested. Celebrate the season and tour the Village homes.
Whitesbog Preservation Trust Membership – 2015
Thank you for your support!

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The Mission of the Trust is to restore, protect and enhance historic
Whitesbog Village, in order to preserve the White family legacy and to
inspire audiences of all ages to experience:
- the origins and innovations of cranberry and blueberry cultivation
- the rich culture and unique ecology of the NJ Pine Barrens.

Whitesbog is administered by the State of New Jersey, Department of Environmental Protection,
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The Whitesbog Preservation Trust has received a
General Operating Support Grant for fiscal year
2016, and a 2016 Special Project Grant from the
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