

Seed spies, smugglers help build early farming

BY DICK ANGLESTEIN

LANCASTER COUNTY —

Lancaster County farmers and their first county agent played a prominent role in seed development, whose history features many dramatic stories of spies, smugglers and explorers.

Lancaster County's particular role centered on the development of hybrid corn, which revolutionized farming throughout the country and ranks among the greatest agricultural developments of all time.

Before the days of hybrids, many varieties of open-pollinated corn were grown throughout the nation.

A well-known variety in Lancaster County and eventually throughout the East was Lancaster Sure-Crop, one of the 18 original ancestors of today's hybrids.

Sure-Crop was a success story of the county and more specifically its first county agent, the late "Dutch" Bucher.

As Dutch once explained it:

"I got all the farmers in the county to furnish me with seed samples," he said.

"Then we laid out test plots for three or four years and finally came up with the Lancaster Sure-Crop variety."

Seed explorer

Dutch was also a local explorer of sorts in search of a better red clover.

"Our farmers never had a decent red clover crop," he explained.

"I had seed shipped in from all over the world — Russia, Asia, Africa, Europe and even Australia.

"We tried some 50 different varieties and none of it worked. One day I heard of a farmer in the southern end of the county who always had a good stand. I looked into it and found what I had been looking for had been here all the time."

That seed later developed into the Penn Scott variety of clover, which was grown all over the East.

Thus for this type of work during the early part of the century, Dutch joined some quite important people out of American history who served as seed spies, smugglers and explorers.

Smuggled in coat

Among them was Thomas Jefferson, who was a champion of agriculture during the early years of the country.

Perhaps, he said it best when he cited the importance of seeds:

"The greatest service which can be rendered to any country is to add a useful plant to its culture."

Jefferson practiced what he preached, too.

While serving in an

overseas diplomatic post before becoming president, Jefferson emerged as one of the first of famous statesman seed spies and smugglers.

Northern Italy grew a particularly good variety of upland rice. But the Italian provincial government wanted to protect its monopoly on this rice and decreed the death penalty for anyone caught smuggling rice seed out of the country.

Jefferson, who was known as a rather flashy dresser, had some seeds sewn into the lining of his coat and smuggled them back to South Carolina personally.

Ben Franklin, too

Ben Franklin was another of the seed spies. As the country's leading ambassador abroad, Franklin also attended many diplomatic functions and was known to court the favor of the wives of wealthy gentleman farmers. Often, they rewarded him with small packets of seeds.

Franklin sent a steady flow of seeds back home and is credited with the introduction of such plants as rhubarb and kale.

But there were many more lesser-known men who played just as important roles in the early history of seed development.

American Indians are often popularly credited with the development of corn. But the crop actually was domesticated in the Andes Mountains of Bolivia and Peru and moved as seed up through Central America and Mexico into North America.

The oldest known cultivation of corn in North America was discovered in Bat Cave of New Mexico. Remains of cultivated corn there date back some 5,000 years.

The types of northern flints grown by these early Indians in the East resemble crops from the mountains of Guatemala. While corn cultivation farther west appeared to be patterned after Mexican-like dents.

Indians also had a hand in distributing other types of seeds. Wild peaches found by the first settlers in Pennsylvania were brought here from Spanish plantings a century earlier in St. Augustine, Fla.

Johnny Appleseed

And, there really was a Johnny Appleseed, too. His real name was John Chapman.

Chapman and the massive thirsts that pioneer Pennsylvanians had for cider and applejack led directly to many orchards in the wilderness of Ohio and Indiana.

Chapman visited cider presses throughout colonial Pennsylvania and collected seeds from the pomice. For more than a half-century, he carried these seeds by canoe and backpack into Ohio and Indiana, where he planted countless thousands of apple trees.

Immigrant farmers also were important in the development of seed.

One of them was a man named Wendelin Grimm, who emigrated from Baden, Germany in 1857. One of the

most prized possessions he brought along to his new home in Carver County, Minnesota, was a few pounds of alfalfa seed.

He planted the seeds and each year saved those few which survived the tough, cold Minnesota winters. Gradually, he developed the first hardy alfalfa that could survive winter-kill. His Grimm alfalfa seeds were passed out to friends and neighbors without any fanfare or compensation.

Columbus began the introduction of Old World crops with his second voyage in 1493. He carried seeds of barley, wheat, sugarcane and grapes on the second voyage.

The first organized effort at collecting seeds began in 1817 when Elkannah Watson, one of the founders of the Berkshire Agricultural Society in Massachusetts, sent a letter to U.S. consuls in Europe asking them to collect and forward seeds.

Consuls recruited

Two years later, William H. Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury, officially directed consuls and naval officers to send seeds home.

But still Congress didn't appropriate any funds for the seeds. The Agricultural Society of South Carolina began to allot \$200 a year in 1823 for naval officers to cover their costs of correspondence.

Some of these unknown naval officers made real contributions to early agriculture in places like Lancaster County.

Farmers in this area, other sections of the state and New York, had particular trouble with a wheat pest, called Hessian Fly, beginning as early as the mid-1700's. It devastated wheat crops.

Finally, a New York farmer got some seed from a friend on naval duty in the Mediterranean that proved to be resistant. Thus, Hessian Fly was no longer a problem.

Seeds were vital and indispensable in nine out of 10 households in Colonial America. Field and garden crop seeds were saved with the utmost care from year to year. Seeds were more valuable than money and were widely traded. Thus, the best of the seeds were distributed.

Finally in 1839, Congress responded to the request of Henry L. Ellsworth, Commissioner of Patents, to appropriate funds for the collection and distribution of seeds. The program began with an initial allocation of \$1,000 that first year.

Seed packages

The seed program continued through 1923. Perhaps, some area farmers and gardeners can recall receiving packages of seeds through their Congressmen. Billions of packages were so distributed.

Here in Lancaster County, the town of Lititz is known as the final home of General Sutter, on whose land gold was discovered in California.

Well, the "Forty-niners" who responded to that discovery also carried seeds to the West Coast. Seeds of a Chilean alfalfa were in-



Lancaster Sure-Crop, still found growing in some demonstration plots, was one of the 18 original ancestors of today's corn hybrids. It was developed from seed collected throughout Lancaster County.

duced to the West Coast by gold seekers passing through Cape Horn.

Some three decades after the U.S. Department of Agriculture was formed in 1862, Secretary James Wilson launched a federal program of sending seed explorers throughout the world.

It was these explorers who provided the red clover seed to Dutch Bucher, which didn't help in improving the local variety.

Carloads of seed

See explorers traveled for thousands of miles through countries like Russia. One such explorer collected some five carloads of seeds and had them sent back to the U.S. Often, they traveled by mule, sleigh or even walked.

Thus, out of these unusual and unique efforts of early seed collectors and distributors literally grew the agriculture of the country and the modern seed industry.

Today, countless thousands of acres of seeds are harvested annually throughout the country.

And many individuals still save the best of their seed from one year to the next. In this way they join plant breeders at state ag experiment stations and private seed companies in selective plant improvement programs of all types.

But as area farmers and gardeners survey the seed

catalogs during a long winter's evening, they should remember that today's seeds have historical beginnings in such un-

orthodox places as the coat-tails of Thomas Jefferson, the spectacle case of Ben Franklin or the bootcase of Dutch Bucher's motorcycle.



Dutch Bucher, Lancaster's first county agent, was instrumental in the collection of seed corn and the development of Lancaster Sure-Crop, a popular variety of many years ago important in the eventual development of hybrids.

