

Boylston's Corn Husking Bee

By Inga Milbauer

On 5 December 2005, as part of the Boylston Historical Society's oral history project, Judy Haynes conducted an interview with Donald Harper Rich at his home in Northborough, Massachusetts. Donald, the son of Irving Rich and Bertha Harper, was born on 17 June 1923. "Don's later years included the Navy during World War II, marriage to Phyllis L. Beckstrom, a family of three sons, engineering school, sales of mechanical hardware, and an antiques business."¹ He died on 5 July 2021 at the age of 98 years.

The Rich family lived in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts until 1935 when they moved to 'Hillside' (John B. Gough House) in Boylston. The Hillside property was owned at that time by George F. Fuller who had purchased it in 1930. Fuller leased the property to Irving Rich for farming until 1938. Horses, pigs, chickens and cows were kept at the farm; the barn would hold 100 cows. According to Donald Rich, the crops raised by his father were:

"mostly hay and cow corn, corn for the silo, ensilage corn. That's when the corn ferments in the silo."²

The corn they grew was:

"Yellow corn, and the ears were big, probably 14-15 inches long. We sent the corn to the mill and they ground it up cob and all and then we got it back and fed the cows."³

He remembers one year when corn was raised with a lot of ears on it,

"we took all the ears off, and we had a big husking bee in the front end of the horse barn."⁴

For more information on the farm and barn, please read *If a Barn Could Talk* by Judy Haynes: FFF10272023 If A Barn Could Talk.pdf (boylstonhistory.org)



BARN

*Used by Irving Rich 1935-1938
BHSM Photograph Collection*

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, one of the definitions of the word bee is "a gathering that combines cooperative labor and social interaction or friendly competition: a quilting bee." The origin of the word is "possibly alteration of dialectal bean, been, voluntary help given to a farmer by neighbors, from Middle English bene, request, boon, extra service by a tenant to his lord, from Old English bēn, request, prayer."⁵

European settlers in North America adopted growing corn and communal corn husking practices at the end of the harvest from the Native American inhabitants. Local farmers needed to prepare the corn after the annual harvest for winter. The silky husk had to be removed as it trapped moisture and caused rotting. Farmers in the area would gather to help their neighbor husk its corn crop. The husking bee became a common autumn event from colonial times to the mid twentieth century. These gatherings were also social events with dinner, dancing and games after the work was done. The tedious husking part of the gathering was lightened by telling stories and singing songs. Another tradition was to hunt for the red ear. A corn crop may infrequently contain a red ear of corn, which was caused by a sugar imbalance in the plant.

*"The rarity of these red ears inspired local folklore. Some early accounts of husking frolics, held that the individual who found a red ear received a kiss as a reward."⁶
"Other rewards regarding the finding of a red ear included the finder receiving good luck or a drink, or the entire group chased the finder around the barn until he or she gave up the red ear."⁷*

Donald Rich described their husking bee as follows:

"In a husking bee, we had a row of corn – probably 20 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 18 inches high – and you invited all your friends and neighbors in to have a party. The idea is to husk the corn and then it would go to the mill and be ground for feed. Anybody that got a red ear could kiss any of the girls, or the girls could kiss any of the men. The idea was to find the red ear. The red ears made their circuit many times around."⁸

A corn husking event which took place in 1902 is depicted in William O. Dupuis' *The Boylston Reader*, a collection of stories, poems, letters and observations about the town of Boylston from the early 1700s to 1997. This corn husking event was organized by Eubert M. Laws. He had purchased part of the David T. Moore and Sons property located off Stiles Road, in the Straw Hollow section of Boylston, around 1885.

¹ Donald Rich Oral History, preface

² Ibid, page 5

³ Ibid, page 6

⁴ Ibid, page 6

⁵ <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=bee>

⁶ <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/husking-parties-in-concord-massachusetts.htm>

⁷ <https://www.morningagclips.com/the-farmers-fall-fun-husking-bees-and-cornhusking-competitions/>

⁸ Donald Rich Oral History, page 6

The Jersey cattle on this farm provided the milk and cream for his ice cream business, the ‘Philadelphia Ice Cream Company of Boston’. In the 1902 Boylston City Directory Eubert Laws is listed as the proprietor of Adelpia Creamery, Old Northborough Road. His residence was Boston.⁹



William A. Moore Property
Part of Moore Farmstead purchased
by Eubert M. Laws for Adelpia Creamery
BHSM Photograph Collection

The corn husking at the Adelpia Farm took place on 27 October 1902, and is described in the *Boylston Reader* as follows:

“Huskings are not unknown to Boylston, but this particular one is indeed novel in its up-to-date character, for the host and promoter of the party, E.W.[M] Laws of Boston, has seen to it that nothing connected to the husking shall be done by halves. Accordingly, 400 men and women from Boston, Worcester, Marlboro, Clinton, Shrewsbury, Northboro, and Boylston gathered in Boylston tonight to participate in a 20th century husking.”

“From Northboro railroad station to the Adelpia Farm, the road was lighted by displays of redfire, for the benefit of the party of 50 who came on the evening train, and in front of the house and barn 100 Chinese lanterns with redfire made fantastic shadows of the hundred or more horses tied to the improvised hitching places along the road.”

“In the barn, Slye’s orchestra of Worcester, from a patriotically draped balcony, accompanied the huskers, while squeals and shouts and laughter were interspersed, telling of the finding of Red Ears.”

“Three hundred bushels of corn were husked in the short space of an hour and a half and then from the balcony came an invitation for 75 to repair to the dining room for refreshments. A long table, filled with good things, greeted the eyes as the guests entered. In the center of the table was a huge silver candelabrum, with its five red candles and red shades, from this to the edges of the table 30 yards of pink and red inch-wide ribbon were draped. Four silver comports, with pink ribbon, decorations, and filled with all kinds of cake, added to the display, while 300 silver teaspoons arranged in a half-dozen semi-circles, completed the table furnishings, this being the work Mr. Law’s right-hand man, William Kerrigan of Boston.”

“In their white coats and aprons, Mr. Kerrigan and his assistants ... dispensed chicken and ham sandwiches, coffee, cake, and ice cream. Boylston people have long sighed for a taste of Mr. Law’s ice cream, for as proprietor of the Philadelphia Ice Cream Co., the reputation of his dainties has reached to the town whence his cream supply comes ... There was cream of all varieties, chocolate, coffee, pistachio, strawberry, vanilla, macaroon, frozen pudding and fancy ices; there was sherbet, lemon, raspberry, and strawberry, while in the hall a bountiful supply of claret frappe awaited those who cared to partake.”

“While refreshments were being served, the barn floor was cleared of corn husks and at 10 o’clock the fun began again, dancing continuing to the strains of music from that time till the wee small hours. The area allotted to this sport was a floor space 110 feet long and about 80 feet wide, well lighted by Chinese and other lanterns.”



View of Cornfield at Elmwood Farm
Boylston, Massachusetts
Circa 1890
BHSM Photograph Collection

Husking bees became less frequent in the early twentieth century as mechanical harvest equipment reduced the need for communal harvest practices.

Acknowledgements:

An Oral History of Donald Harper Rich, interview by Judy Haynes, Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Boylston, 2006

The Boylston Reader – Writings From and About the Heart of the Heart of the Commonwealth, edited & compiled by William O. Dupuis, Boylston Historical Society Inc., Boylston, Massachusetts, 1997

<https://www.morningagclips.com/the-farmers-fall-fun-husking-bees-and-cornhusking-competitions/>

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/husking-parties-in-concord-massachusetts.htm>

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⁹ Boylston City Directory 1900, p. 131