

Strawberry Festival: The Start of a Tradition

by Margaret Hough Russell

The Strawberry Festival is a 50-year tradition at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church on the Village Green in Falmouth. Because it's easy to rewrite history by glossing over the details later, the festival is fondly viewed as an event that sprang from a time when Falmouth produced more strawberries, and sweeter strawberries, per acre than almost any other region in the country.

But the industry that put Falmouth on the map in the 1920s and 1930s was already dying by the time the first strawberry festival was organized in 1951, and the real push for the event was not to support the Portuguese farmers from the Azores and the Cape Verdeans who grew the strawberries but to lure visitors to Falmouth early in the summer.

And despite its long history, the first festival was, by and large, not a big success.

The strawberry queen stands out as an icon of the early festivals, but the queen and her court, and the parade in which they rode, were just one feature of the three-day extravaganza, much of which had little to do with strawberries.

A pageant with a cast of hundreds, a beard-growing contest, and wooden nickels were all featured in the 1951 festival. Although thousands lined Main Street to watch the parade, the community didn't really take to the pageantry organized by an outside promoter. Rain forced the cancellation of several events, and when it was all over, the town was asked to help the organizers make up a deficit of more than \$9,000.

The idea for the strawberry festival came from Captain John R. Peterson, owner of the old Cape Codder Hotel and Park Beach Motel, who was always looking for new ways to boost the Cape. He wasn't merely a promoter, he wanted what was good for Cape Cod, and that included advocating in the 1950s a Cape-wide planning district.

Larger than life, Captain Peterson liked to do things in a big way. His hotel on Buzzards Bay was the largest on Cape Cod, its outdoor swimming pool re-



Whether fishing or running the Cape Codder Hotel or developing a new strawberry hybrid, Captain John R. Peterson did things in a big way. A festival to capitalize on the strawberry industry was his idea. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

portedly the first for a Cape hotel. A wrestler in his earlier days, the former steamship captain cooked up the idea of bringing the boxer Rocky Marciano to the Cape to hunt tuna with a bow and arrow, an idea that never panned out. When he took a party of five fishing around Cuttyhunk in 1943, the anglers caught 1,100 pounds of striped bass.

He also had an interest in strawberries. On his farm off Woods Hole Road, now the town-owned Peterson Farm, Captain Peterson grew 30 varieties of vegetables for his hotel guests. He spent seven years developing an experimental crop of strawberries by crossing native berries with plants from Holland, hoping to revive the strawberry industry with late-bearing berries with stronger stems.

Active in the Falmouth Board of Trade and Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce, Captain Peterson had the influence to make the festival a big affair. He wanted, he said, to make the event bigger than anything the Cape had seen since the digging of the Cape Cod Canal.

Neither the Board of Trade, predecessor of the Chamber of Commerce, nor the town had ever tried to capitalize on the strawberry industry, either to promote the town or the product.



This share issued in the first year the Cape Cod Strawberry Growers Association was incorporated in 1916 was made out to Belmiro Souza Bonito whose name was changed to Belmiro DeSouza. He had a farm on Old Meeting House Road. A copy of the certificate was provided by his daughter, Olive Thayer.

The farmers marketed their product themselves through two cooperatives. The Cape Cod Strawberry Growers Association was formed in 1916. Its president for many years was John DeMello, a prominent builder and member of the planning board; its manager was George Lillie. George's brother, Frank Lillie, was the first president of the Marine Biological Laboratory. Frank was also one of the founders and the first president of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. George's brother-in-law was Wilfrid Wheeler, who served briefly as state commissioner of agriculture. (How Chicago-born George Lillie became an agent for the Portuguese farmers is a mystery. The connection may be baseball: both John DeMello and George Lillie served on the town baseball committee together.) The growers associa-



From the first, Marina and Tony Andrews were staunch supporters of the strawberry festival. Tony Andrews Farm earned top honors for the best float in the first year. The float featured a strawberry bed with pickers from the Andrews's farm. Tony Andrews is wearing an Official Shaver Permit which exempted him from having to grow a beard for the beard growing contest. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

tion grew to be one of the most significant developments in agriculture in the state. A second cooperative, the Falmouth Farmers Cooperative Association, was established in 1930.

By the 1950s, the industry was in decline, primarily because of the shortage of pickers that began with World War II, and a festival wasn't going to revive it. Although some 325 acres were planted in strawber-

ries in East Falmouth in 1951, with farmers producing 10,500, even 15,000, quarts of berries per acre, those numbers were drastically down from the height of the industry in the late 1930s.

In those years, Portuguese farmers from the Azores in East Falmouth — who made up a third of the town's population of 5,000 — were cultivating 600 acres of strawberries on about 400 small farms, more than double the acreage of cranberry bogs. Their yield was remarkable: Barnstable County ranked 52nd in the country in acreage devoted to strawberries in 1939, but 18th in production. In Barnstable County that referred almost

entirely to the East Falmouth growers. No other town had the strawberry acreage that Falmouth had.

Nevertheless, Captain Peterson's idea was a good one. Strawberries are harvested in the last few weeks of June, and a three-day festival at the peak of the harvest could attract visitors earlier than the traditional Fourth of July weekend. If the festival became an

annual tradition, it might lengthen the summer season.

Planning on a grand scale began. A parade, berry picking contest, shortcake contest, prizes for the best fruit, an evening dance and fireworks were suggested by the committee of businessmen who joined Captain Peterson.

In February, they met with growers at St. Anthony's Hall. The trade members pitched the value of the festival to the growers and the need for them to be involved. "The people of Falmouth have never appreciated the amount of money you growers bring into town. A \$400,000 crop is an important thing," said Bertram Tomlinson, the county agent who had long been a source of advice and support for the



This aerial photograph taken in 1948 shows St. Anthony's Church in the top center with the church hall to its left. The Fall River Diocese established the church in East Falmouth in 1923 to serve the Portuguese immigrants. Farmers donated the proceeds of their peak Sunday harvest of strawberries to help pay for the building. Mass was said in Portuguese at St. Anthony's up until the 1960s. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.



Most of the pickers who harvested the strawberries were Portuguese and Cape Verdean. Above, pickers pose for the photographer by strawberry crates at Jack Marshall's farm on Sandwich Road. Below, residents pitched in to pick berries on the Marshall farm when there was a shortage of pickers. The labor shortage, which started in World War II, would be a major reason for the decline of the strawberry industry in the 1950s. Courtesy Alice Valadao.

growers. Servulo Ferreira, Jack Sambade, and Manuel Lawrence agreed to work with Mr. Tomlinson on the exhibit committee. Tony Andrews, Frank Rose, Manuel Rodriques, and John Costa volunteered to serve on the berry-picking contest.

The Enterprise threw its support behind the project. "The Strawberry Festival is, therefore, a community effort to better itself by doing something for a segment of the community which has in the past been left pretty much to make its own way. The town has spent a lot of money and effort on promoting vacation business which benefits the agricultural interest only indirectly. It is time the town

put its hands to promoting its most important agricultural opportunity."

By March, the Cape Cod Chamber voted to underwrite the festival with \$6,000 for an historical pageant. At that point, plans for the festival veered away from its original mission to promote Falmouth strawberries to a motley extravaganza.

Captain Peterson wanted a classy event. "There will be no carnival, no amusement rides and no concessions selling hot dogs or balloons. We are not going to let this be a circus," he said. Nor would the competition for strawberry queen be a bathing suit contest; instead,





Pickers of all ages worked in the fields to harvest berries in the short season in June and early July. They received small cardboard tickets printed with the number of boxes picked and the name of the grower. The tickets were redeemable when the grower had sold his berries, usually in Boston. Photo from 1951 Cape Cod Festival of the Strawberry souvenir program. Tickets courtesy Greg Souza, son of the former Falmouth shellfish warden George Souza.



the winner would be the young woman who sold the most tickets to the pageant.

The chamber hired the John Rogers company to produce the show. The firm had experience helping towns celebrate centennials and bi-centennials, but their reputation wasn't stellar. *The Enterprise* recalled that a John Rogers representative came to town to plan events for Falmouth's 250th anniversary. Finding no organization and little enthusiasm, he obtained permission from his bosses to put the contract with the town on hold for a year. He reportedly went off to play tennis and was never heard from again.

The agent for the festival, Herbert Pitts, followed the script other towns used for historical celebrations. The pageant, produced in three shows over the weekend, would depict an historical event or person in each Cape town, like Katharine Lee Bates, Sandwich Glass Works, and Marconi's first transat-

lantic wireless message. There would be a cast of 400 people, with dogs and horses, appearing on the stage at the athletic field. Merchants would hand out wooden nickels, stamped with the festival and date, instead of change to customers, and the nickels would help publicize the event. A beard-growing contest was supposed to add an old-fashioned element. Felt hats and strawberry-shaped buttons would be sold.

The name was changed. Strawberry Festival suggested a church social, pleasant but small scale, Mr. Pitts said. Instead, he called it Cape Cod's Festival of Strawberries.

He also promised the festival would be a money-maker for the town.

Meanwhile, by April the prospects for a good berry harvest were favorable, as long as frost, drought, or insects didn't intervene, but a picker shortage, which



Albert Marks was one of several East Falmouth growers featured in *The Enterprise* in 1951 to promote the first Strawberry Festival. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

had plagued the growers since World War II, was likely. Tony Andrews, who had one of the largest farms at 45 acres, reported that most of his pickers were working in factories “making big money.” That year growers paid pickers a nickel a box, up from three cents a box pickers received in the 1930s. Growers held firm on the nickel pay at a meeting held at St. Anthony’s Hall, despite the desperate need for some 1,600 pickers to harvest Falmouth berries.

Some farmers thought the town festival would help bring a higher price for their berries; others weren’t

sure. Nor were they sure of their role in the festival. Jack Sambade, an enthusiastic supporter, said growers were willing to help but didn’t know how they could when the festival coincided with their busiest season. Manuel F. Rapoza, who grew strawberries on his property on Old Barnstable Road as a sideline to his business, suspected many growers weren’t



Jack Marshall and his wife, Mary, farmed several acres of strawberries on Sandwich Road. He didn’t want his livelihood to depend on berries, his daughter Alice Valadao said, so he worked for HV Lawrences and the town parks department before starting his own landscape and construction business. Courtesy Alice Valadao.

sure what the event was all about. What would help the growers, he said, was an auction that would bring the buyers to Falmouth to buy directly from the farmers.

The farmers' only direct role in the festival was to organize the picking contest and judge the berry exhibit. Tony Andrews led the picking contest committee, with the help of Frank Rose, John Costa, and Manuel L. Rodrigues. Jack M. Sambade, Manuel Lawrence, and Servula Ferreira were in charge of the strawberry judging.

The only other representation from East Falmouth in the long list of planning committees were builders who served on the construction committee – Arthur P. Vidal, Manuel Pacheco Jr., John DeMello, and Manuel T. Medeiros – and a committee of “Portuguese consultants” comprised of the Rev. J.M. Bettencourt Avila of St. Anthony’s Church, Manuel F. Rapoza, Manuel R. Tavares, and John Lewis.

By mid-May, a month before the festival, Mr. Pitts was appealing to merchants for more support. “Falmouth people must let their hair down and get out and play,” he chided.

If residents didn’t throw their full enthusiasm behind the event, the town was at least ready when the festival weekend arrived. The pageant had started rehearsals with 300 actors, not quite the 400 anticipated, the wooden nickels were in circulation, and 11 organizations had entered floats in the parade.

The weekend schedule for the first Cape Cod Festival of Strawberries was elaborate. There would be a band concert and the historical pageant at the athletic field on Thursday, followed by square dancing on the street and fireworks in the evening. Friday



Myron Tavares of Davisville Road had been raising berries for 30 years when this photograph was taken for *The Enterprise* in 1951. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

would offer youth contests on the Village Green, flower show, kite flying contest and swimming at the Cape Codder Hotel, with fireworks again at night.

Strawberries, finally, would be the center of attention on Saturday. The berry picking contest was scheduled for Frank Rose’s farm on Central Avenue, and a strawberry exhibit would be set up at the town recreation building. After the big parade on Main Street, there would be traditional Portuguese dancing in the street, the pageant again, a queen’s ball at

the rec building, and the queen would hold court at an officer's ball at Camp Edwards.

The pageant was scheduled for one more performance following a religious concert at the athletic field on Sunday.

But the weather, always the uncertain factor plaguing the berry harvest, played havoc with the festival. A slow-moving storm drenched the town in mid-week, and the cold drizzle that continued through the weekend forced postponement of several activities.

The sun broke through the wet skies on Saturday in time for the parade. Most of the weekend's events fizzled, but the parade was a big success. It was not a John Rogers production, but a home-grown affair, much like today's Christmas parade in Falmouth.

At a time when the town census tallied fewer than 10,000 residents, an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 spectators lined the parade route from Scranton Avenue to the Village Green. State Rep. Allen Jones led the way on a black horse borrowed from the

stables of the Highfield estate. Falmouth's National Guard unit, Battery C of the 685th AAA Gun Battalion followed with several bands and about 25 floats.

The loudest applause went to the local home-made floats: Clarence Noyes dressed in hunting clothes

and carrying a shotgun on the Rod and Gun Club's entry; Ellis M. Lewis in a sou'wester and oil skins in a dory filled with fishing line and lobster pots on the Cape Cod Rotary Club float; and Mrs. John Howe sitting on a clamshell throne on rolling green waves representing the North Falmouth Village float. That received the award for most original.

The prize for the best float went to Tony Andrews Farm in East Falmouth. Mr. Andrews helped finance his entry fee with the \$75 won by his wife, Marina, in the contest to sell wooden nickels advertising the festival to merchants, who would give them out as change to customers. He created a strawberry bed on his float, with pickers from his

farm at work: Mary Brink, Mable Fortes, Mamie Mandos, Pearl Pinto, and Marian Garcia. Second place went to the Buzzards Bay Gas Company, which



Cynthia (Augusta) Botelho was selected the first Strawberry Queen in 1951. Her grandfather, Antone Augusta, was one of the first strawberry growers in town. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.



What is today a bustling commercial section around Kenyon's Korner on East Falmouth Highway was still very rural in 1951. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

had a lavish green, yellow, and pink float prepared by professionals. The Falmouth Rod and Gun Club, Mystic Lake Farm in Marstons Mills, and the Junior Outlook Club also won awards.

The strawberry queen, Cynthia Augusta, now Cynthia Botelho, was featured prominently in the parade. Her grandfather, Antone Augusta, was one of the first strawberry growers in town.

With the regal honors going to the young woman who sold the most pageant tickets and garnered the most votes, Miss Augusta worked hard for the crown. A telephone operator, she had afternoons and part of every evening off. She used the time traveling in the family car through the villages of Falmouth and going door to door. At Camp Edwards she was allowed to set up a booth in one of the service clubs.



Louis, Irene, Ernest and Charlotte DeSouza pick strawberries on the family farm on Old Meeting House Road. Their father, Belmiro DeSouza, came to Falmouth in 1914 at the age of 17. Courtesy Olive Thayer.

The board of trade treated the strawberry queen as an ambassador for the town and its local product. The following days were a whirlwind, taking her to Boston for radio appearances and a visit to the State House. On the Boston Common she posed for cameras with a milk cow for National Dairy Week. Back at home, she met the cranberry train in Buzzards Bay, temporarily renamed the strawberry train, and presented the engineer with a box of berries.

The honors didn't end there. The strawberry queen was also sent on a trip to New York City for four hectic days of theater, shopping, visits to a television studio and St. Patrick's Cathedral. Her next-door neighbor at the Park Sheraton Hotel on Seventh Avenue was Eleanor Roosevelt, "a most gracious lady," she said. "When she en-

tered the hotel, she took everyone's breath away."

The strawberry queen and the parade were the bright spots in a disappointing festival. A post-mortem revealed hats and buttons unsold, frustrated merchants who didn't realize the wooden nickels would be worth nothing when the festival was over, and a deficit of \$9,000.

The Cape Chamber of Commerce and Captain Peterson said the publicity for the town was worth it. Speaking for the growers, Tony Andrews agreed the festival should be tried again, but with more focus on strawberries.

The Enterprise, advocating a real strawberry festival planned by Falmouth people for Falmouth people, offered a \$100 prize for the fastest picker at next year's event.



Like much of East Falmouth in the middle of the last century, the upper end of Davisville Road was all farmland. This photograph shows workers cutting hay on the 40-acre farm owned by Manuel and Mary Benevides. Their daughter Arlene Soares lives on property that was once part of the farm. Courtesy Arlene Soares.

Undeterred, board of trade members and several growers, including Tony and Marina Andrews, Jack Sambade, and Charles Botelho, planned a scaled-down version the following year. It was one day instead of two, and the stunts of the previous year promoted by the production company were dropped. The festival was scheduled later, too, to help the growers. The year before, the festival held up prices but didn't help Falmouth farmers because their berries were already on the market. There was another factor in the timing: the festival was set for the weekend hundreds of Odd Fellows would be in town for a convention.

For the next few years, the strawberry festival was a decidedly local event. The parade would continue, with the queen and strawberry-picking champion riding in a convertible. Margaret Rodrigues of East Falmouth was selected queen in 1952, followed by Nancy Schroeder the next year and Georgie Lillie in 1954. The Megansett and Falmouth Granges served home-made strawberry shortcake in front of town hall, and boxes of berries were sold from sidewalk tables. Dozens of

youngsters competed to see who could eat a layer cake the fastest. There were strawberry exhibits at the Village School field behind the library and, at night, square dancing on Hewins Street.

The picking contest was moved from farm to farm, depending on whose berries were prime for picking. One year it was held at Jack Sambade's farm on

Maravista Avenue, other years in Luciano Botelho's fields off Route 151 and Manuel Rezendes farm on Sandwich Road. The most skilled pickers could harvest between 200 to 300 boxes in a 10-hour day. By comparison, the German prisoners of war from Camp Edwards who were brought in to save the harvest during World War II were asked to pick 100 quarts a day but at their best managed to pick 70 quarts.



Finishing up after a long day of harvesting berries at the Souza farm in East Falmouth. Courtesy Greg Souza.

Ann Gomes of Brick Kiln Road in East Falmouth won the first year, picking 35 quarts of berries in an hour. She was ready to defend her title in 1952, but the honors went to an East Providence picker, Elvira Barrows that year and again in 1955. Lenora Botelho of East Falmouth won in 1953 with 39 quarts of berries picked per hour. Josephine Costa of Teaticket was the fastest picker in 1954. A few men competed, but they never won. Edmund Botelho of West Falmouth came the closest, placing second in 1955.

The festival appeared to be launched, but the board of trade was disappointed. The event wasn't bringing in the visitors the

merchants hoped for, and the board debated whether to continue its support in 1955. Captain Peterson was the lone champion. Most of the board members agreed with a former chairman who pointed out the strawberry crop was dwindling. "The one thing we have to sell is recreation. We can better spend our money doing that," he said. With a vote in March,



Crowd applauds 1954 parade on Palmer Avenue as it approaches the Queens Buyway.
 Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

the board of trade ended its involvement in the festival.

Undeterred, Marina Andrews, who with her husband Tony had been a staunch supporter, took up the cause. Mrs. Andrews was indefatigable. A member of the League of Women Voters, president of the Teaticket PTA, and a new town meeting member, she was one of the founders of the Falmouth Strawberry Club two years earlier. About 25 growers started the club at the urging of the county agent, Bertram Tomlinson. The industry was at a crossroads, he said at a meeting at St. Anthony's Church, and strawberries could disappear as a commercial crop in Falmouth. Mrs.

Andrews was elected secretary of the new club.

The strawberry club decided to put on the festival. It was planned as a one-day event, stripped of parade and queen, with a program built around the strawberry.

Strawberry Day on June 18 featured a shortcake contest sponsored by the Falmouth Grange, a picking contest at Albert Perry's farm on Sandwich Road, and an agricultural exhibit in front of town hall. The Falmouth Square Dance Club held a dance in the evening at the rec center.



Strawberry Queen Georgie Lillie waves as she rides past the Eastman building on Main Street in the 1954 Strawberry Festival parade. Ms. Lillie was the daughter of George Lillie, who was the manager for many years of the Strawberry Growers Association.
 Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

Although Mr. Marks had the earliest berries that season, his yield was way down from previous years. There were too many insects, and the land was tired, he said. His farm produced 30,000 berries an acre 30 years earlier, but now he was getting only 3,000 berries an acre.

With a new baby the following year, Marina Andrews was unable to organize a festival. The Couples Club at St. Barnabas Church decided it would put on a strawberry fair in late June and sell old-fashioned strawberry shortcake and home-made jam. Other groups organized a few events, but none, as *The Enterprise* pointed out, had anything to do with agriculture.

Once the king of agriculture in Falmouth, the strawberry was disappearing. A few small farms contin-

ued to sell strawberries and other produce at roadside stands for another decade, but they, too, would gradually disappear. Only a few remain. Tony Andrews Farm survived, thanks to irrigation and the new concept of pick your own, and Frank Rose still has a farm and stand.

The strawberry festival at St. Barnabas has endured – the church social that John Rogers Productions derided in 1951.

Margaret Hough Russell, editor and co-publisher of *The Enterprise*, will leave the newspaper business in January to join The 300 Committee, Falmouth's land trust. She began researching the Portuguese immigrants from the Azores who settled East Falmouth as part of her work for the Emerald House Thrift Shop on Davisville Road. The town-owned building belonged for nearly a century to the family of Manuel Emerald, a prominent strawberry grower.



The 1954 Strawberry Queen's float goes down Main Street. Courtesy *The Falmouth Enterprise*.