

Above the Fruited Bog

Cranberry Prairie: Good land, obscure location and proud of it.

By Randy McNutt



Nobody expected much of Cranberry Prairie. Other towns had promise and a feed mill, but all Cranberry Prairie had was that infernal muck. So when the erratic winds of commerce blew over Mercer County towns in the mid-1800s, Cranberry Prairie didn't even notice. Its people were too busy trying to fashion homesteads out of the boggy land to concern themselves with such arcane matters as business.

Perhaps that is why banks and inns and the usual amenities of small-town Ohio never took root in their hamlet. Cranberry Prairie was a place where only *crops* seemed to sprout. The soil on the west side of the community consisted of the rich decay of the ages. For thousands of years, thick vegetation had grown and died until a twelve-hundred-acre peat bog—later called the prairie of Cranberry Prairie—was left.

A bog seemed an unlikely place on which to wager hopes and investments, yet such a cockeyed notion obsessed the immigrants. Arriving from Germany in the middle of the nineteenth century, they thought hard work could transform the swampy region of their new home into immaculate fields. So they worked. By 1880, their hamlet was green but not large, and many of the once-prosperous towns of the county had already dwindled back to

Creating farm land out of a peat bog saved Cranberry Prairie; now, what was once a general store is a center for migrant workers.

Photos by Eric Weinberg



"From its founding in 1837, Cranberry Prairie gradually changed to farm land. Obstinacy was as much a resource as flat land."

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obscurity.

Not much has changed since. About two hundred people, mainly descendants of the immigrants, are still locked in a perpetual motion of planting and harvesting on the family farms. Horse-drawn machinery is gone, of course, and powerful combines swarm through the waves of corn. But the view and the hamlet remain uncluttered. The layout is simple: About twenty-five houses cluster around the intersection of Cranberry Road and Recovery-Minster Road; an old brick church and rectory and a couple of farm-related businesses fit in between the houses. What was once a general store is now a center for migrant workers. "We like the town this way because everything is easy to find," somebody said.

It might have been Frank Hemmelgarn. He lives near Saint Francis Church, which his father helped found, and from his kitchen window distant silos look like pillars supporting a roof of clouds. Mr. Hemmelgarn never tires of looking at the huge patch of green that extends from his yard. Corn, wheat, hay, soybeans. *Ecstasy*! Each morning he rises to gauge the weather—an old farmer's habit—by looking through his kitchen window. He worked this land most of his seventy-nine years, and at one time he knew the location of every big hole and rock. Now that he is retired, however, the fields have somehow become strangers to him. He stares longingly at them, something like a jilted suitor.

On a muggy morning in June, he stands at the window and says the hamlet is blessed with plenty of crops and few people. He wouldn't change it, he explains, because the beauty of a small community lies in *history*, not subdivisions.

Cranberry Prairie has history, if nothing else. For some reason, the hamlet has managed to exist for more than a century without much attention. Some people in Celina, the county seat, haven't even heard of the place. "When we go to town, most of us just say, 'We're from central Mercer County,' " says Mr. Hemmelgarn. "Then we'll add, 'By the way, you ever heard of Cranberry Prairie?' The younger ones usually say no, because we're not on many maps."

Cranberry Prairie lies just west of U.S. Rt. 127 in rural Granville Township. Since its founding in 1837, the township's growth has remained steady in agriculture, for the area is covered with some of Ohio's most fertile soil, and it is a tidy little outpost on an agricultural frontier where blood is mixed successfully with business.

Mr. Hemmelgarn's grandfather arrived from Germany about 1850 and immediately liked the topography, although he was puzzled by a crimson sea of wild cranberries blooming in the marshes. "Cranberries as far as you could *see*," says Al Huwer. "What a sight. Our people didn't believe they were edible, though, so they tore 'em out. Haven't had any cranberries here to this day. But the name sure stuck."

The newcomers also found a land filled with snakes and mosquitoes. Nevertheless, Herr Hemmelgarn and his friends were determined to make the swamp productive. With Hail Marys on their lips and pistols at their sides, they dug out the marshes. The work took years and ingenuity, and it was not done without sacrifice. Mr. Huwer says that many men, including his uncle, reached down into the brush and came up screaming, rattlesnakes wrapped around their arms.

Into this willful land came William Simison, an early Cranberry settler and hermit not known for his love of farming. He is discussed even to this day. People say he was not afraid of any man or animal, and considering where he lived, they are probably correct. He was a mystery to the immigrants. They liked to tell their children of the time that Bill borrowed a pair of pants. He had used his own to fill a crack in a log cabin to keep out wolves.

Mr. Hemmelgarn says Simison represented the wilderness—the roughness—that was the prairie. "Old Bill had been in the Army once, but he ran away," he says. "The Army captured him and brought him to the swamp on an express wagon, which was sort of a pickup with wagon wheels. But Bill was sly. He got loose and slipped out into the prairie. Well, nobody thought he'd survive out there. The Army folks came to our house to ask where Bill was hidin', I'm told, but my grandpa refused to say anything. Bill lived the rest of his life out there on the prairie. Now he's buried there."

The prairie gradually changed to farm land. Obstinacy was as much a resource as flat land. Historian S. S. Scranton saluted the hamlet in 1907: "The dredging of the Wabash River has reclaimed this waste land, which has become the finest farming section of the township. Few farms are encumbered by debt. The farmers take pride in having the best stock that money will buy and, as a class, are industrious and economical. The German people have *made* this section of the county, bringing it from a wilderness to scores of productive farms."

Yet the land had only begun to show its potential. About 1906, a large supply of natural gas was discovered, and for a few years some of the fields of Cranberry Prairie helped fuel Dayton, Troy, Piqua and other Ohio cities. But the gas business eventually died. Farmers were too smart to lease their land for something that they could not watch grow. Their business was farming. In fact, only the Roman Catholic Church was more sacred to them. Saint Francis Parish was organized in 1859 for sixty-five families, about the same number that worships there today.

Mr. Hemmelgarn says the land and church give people everything they need. The only time he ever doubted the future was during the 1930s, when the Great Depression reached into even Cranberry Prairie.

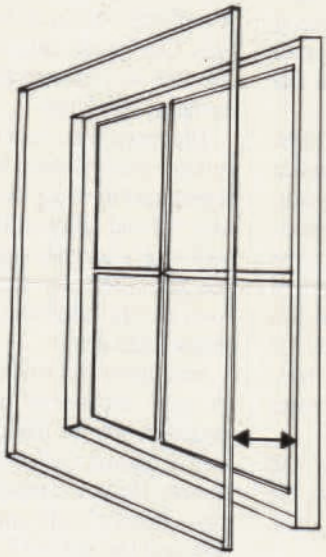


The land and the church meet the townspeople's needs. Left, three generations of Huwers. Far left, St. Francis Church.

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"I used to raise Poland China hogs, and one day a man asked me, 'Frank, you need this hog?' " he recalls. "I told him, 'Joe, I need *money*. Hog's for sale. Five dollars.' He said, 'Give you three,' and I said, 'You just bought yourself a *hog*.' What could I do? Times were hard. But at six hundred pounds of hog, that sale came out to about a half cent a pound."

But neither depression nor time shook the German names from the mailboxes on the roads of Cranberry Prairie. The old ones are still there: Huwer, Hemmelgarn, Langenkamp, Zahn. A visitor is hard pressed to find an Englishman among them.

The Stucke farmers, aided by *their* stubborn German blood, says Mrs. Hilda Stucke, have taken an original sixty acres of prairie land and expanded to fourteen hundred acres of corn, beans, wheat and clover. Whatever they plant seems to grow, which does not surprise her. She says Cranberry Prairie farmers are successful not only because of rich land but because of innovative methods of cultivation, as well as blood.

Henry Stucke, her husband, bought a piece of undeveloped prairie in 1934. By the time he died in 1969, he had pushed the borders of Stucke Farms Inc. out of the prairie and into the surrounding countryside. "My Henry was a particular and intelligent man," says Mrs. Stucke. "He built one of Ohio's top storage facilities. Our trucks are on the road seven days a week, and we sell potatoes to Frito-Lay and other chip companies. But all this didn't just grow up overnight. It took work, dedication."

Mrs. Stucke still lives in their little farmhouse, surrounded by patches of petunias, marigolds, geraniums and violets. Her sons work out back in a spacious metal barn, which has storage rooms for heavy equipment, an accounting office and a truck terminal. Other large buildings are filled with crops, mainly potatoes.

At dusk, Mrs. Stucke stands near the big metal barns and waves her hands over neat green rows of potatoes. "See, we got the *prairie* out there," she says. "That helps. But we just don't grow potatoes. We store them till they *sweat*. That's the secret to good taste."

For her, the fields are filled with both crops and memories. "When Henry first bought a farm on the prairie, I couldn't believe it. I remember saying, 'What do you want with a *water hole*, Henry?' He said, 'Hilda, things will work out.' And they did. Now I love to come out here in the evening and look at the fields. They're so green. So perfect."

Hilda Stucke looks dreamily up Cranberry Road, toward John Huwer's farm, and a balmy summer breeze blows gently on her face. "Perfect . . . " she says again, softly, as she smiles. ●

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