

DID YOU EVER WONDER...

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywitz



It's so much fun for all ages, watching it change from looking one way to a look that is entirely different. It is so popular that there is even a national day just for celebrating it. This coming year it will be January 19, 2024. It is the official state snack food of Illinois. Songs, poems and stories have been written in its honor. There is something irresistible about --- popcorn.

Not all popcorn is created equal. Archeologists have found traces of popcorn in 1000 year-old Peruvian tombs as well as evidence of it in Mexico and Guatemala and Central and South America. Aztecs used it for decorating clothes and ceremonial embellishments as well as eating it. French explorers who traveled to the new world, discovered popcorn being made by the Iroquois Native Americans in the Great Lakes region in pottery jars filled with heated sand. As the number of colonists grew, the enjoyment of this special corn also grew. The story that it was part of the first Thanksgiving feast in 1621 is false, however. Even though the early settlers at Plymouth did grow corn, it was the Northern Flint variety that

was unsuitable for popping. The first mention of popcorn at Thanksgiving was in a fictional work published in 1889. The variety that is known to 'pop' perfectly is called *zea mays everta*. In the 1800s, Americans consumed it as a breakfast cereal with milk and a sweetener.

Most people started out making popcorn in their homes using the fireplace or stove to provide the needed heat. When the first commercial popcorn machine was invented in 1885 by Charles Cretors, large-scale opportunities were presented since the machine was mobile and increased the number of people who had access to the treat. Cretors was a candy-store owner who purchased a peanut roaster powered by steam, converting it for this use.

Such an apparatus appeared in the Village of Richfield Springs in May of 1903 when it was announced: "An attractive popcorn wagon with peanut roaster attachment is one of the new things of the season. It will be located near the Brunswick Hotel."

During the Great Depression (1929-1939) the popularity of this product increased tremendously because the cost was reasonable and it could be afforded by most. Area farmers here grew their own. Mrs. Adelbert Sponable advertised that in 1929, she had popcorn and Northern Spy apples for sale. Wesley McRorie reported in 1930 that he had raised a good-sized crop of nice popcorn.

During war time, especially World War II when sugar rationing was in effect, Americans compensated for the lack of candy and sugar related products by consuming about three times as much popcorn as they had previously. In 1944, at her piano recital, Naomi Trask honored those

who offered this product by playing "The Popcorn Man".

Instructions on the right way to 'pop' your corn frequently appeared, but what was the answer to the mystery of why there is even a 'pop' in popcorn? That little kernel has three layers - pericarp/germ (or embryo)/endosperm - and contains both moisture and oil. The outer hull is strong and impervious to moisture but there is starch inside the kernel that, when hot enough, melts. The moisture inside drops against the starch and becomes water vapor. The hot water vapor pushes on the inside of the seed coat until a tiny crack forms where vapor and starch can slip out. The kernel flips as the rest of the water vapor and starch come out. Almost instantly, the starch hardens into a crisp solid, looking like our familiar treat. W. C. Fields is quoted as saying: "The laziest man I ever met put popcorn in his pancakes so that they would turn over by themselves!"

Just like snowflakes, no two pieces of popcorn are alike. One pound of kernels will pop into sixty cups of popcorn. A popped kernel is known as a 'flake' and those that fail to pop are called 'old maids'.

One of Cornell's bulletins in 1929 regarding this home-grown crop said that popcorn usually fails to do its best because it is too dry, so special attention should be paid to storage. Storage in an outside shed where the air can circulate freely about the corn is recommended as an ideal place to store popcorn throughout the winter months. Popcorn stored outside will be ready for popping usually about Christmas time and will remain in nearly perfect popping condition throughout the year. Popcorn stored in

the house dries out rapidly and soon becomes too dry for good popping. The kernels need about 14 per cent moisture to do their best. If it becomes too dry, it can be restored to good condition by putting some of the shelled corn in a fruit jar, adding a little water, sealing up the jar, shaking thoroughly and allowing the corn to stand for two days. The recommended amount of water varies with the dryness but quantities ranging from two to five tablespoonfuls for each two pounds of shelled popcorn is recommended.

Area merchants promoted the sale of popcorn regularly. Examples of this were shown by ads from 1922 when C. E. Goodale and Company offered shelled popcorn at 4 lbs. for 25 cents and 5 lbs. on the cob for 25 cents; 1937 Ralph's Market on Lake Street, offered home-grown popcorn at 3 lbs. for 25 cents; 1940 found Richfield Springs Super Market on Lake Street with an offer of 2 lbs. for 15 cents; 1952 Pic & Pay advertised two, one-pound packages for 37 cents. Popcorn was sold in all area stores including one of our local drug

stores owned by Ainslie Buck who offered it for 13 cents a pound or two pounds for 25 cents in 1937. Although prices have risen considerable and there are many more varieties to try, the familiar standby of popcorn is emerging for the year 2023 as the inflation proof go-to for a heart-healthy snack. (Don't forget to watch the amount of butter and salt, however!)

Easily available, you'll find that it was, and still is, a favorite at all types of gatherings whether sports, school class fund raisers, card parties, carnivals and fairs, or as gifts, no matter the time of year. Don't forget about those popcorn balls and, if you have patience, popcorn strings to decorate your Christmas tree. Popcorn has been popular at movie theaters since the 1930s. The use of popcorn for a snack at home increased after 1981 when General Mills received the first patent for the microwave popcorn bag.

Now, if you'll excuse me - it's time I got 'popping'! After all, a day without popcorn is a day without smiles.

Fall Craft Fair at Cullen Pumpkin Farm

The Cullen Pumpkin Farm, located at 587 Cullen Road, Richfield Springs, is hosting a Fall Craft Fair to be held on Saturday, October 7 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The Fall Craft Fair is coordinated by the Women's Guild of the Church of Christ Uniting, Richfield Springs.

The Cullen Pumpkin Farm, a long-time family-owned business, is a popular fall destination attracting visitors young and not so young from a wide area. Their season opened on Saturday, September 16

The Food Booth will be provided by the Richfield Youth Sports organization.

Crafters are coming from near and far showcasing exclusively a wide variety of handcrafted items. Applications are being accepted until October 1. For info/application go to the home page of www.rschurchofchristuniting.com, e-mail fallcraftfair@yahoo.com or call Carla at 315-858-1451.