

[M. T. Cragg]

Mass. 1938-9 Connecticut Valley Yankee Farmer

M. T. Cragg - A son of generations

of Connecticut Valley farmers

STATE Massachusetts

NAME OF WORKER Robert Wilder

ADDRESS Northfield, Massachusetts

DATE January 13, 1939

SUBJECT Living Lore

NAME OF INFORMANT M. T. Cragg

ADDRESS Northfield, Massachusetts

Mr. Cragg lives in the section of Northfield known as "The Mountain", on an old farm where he was born and his father before him. His lean, gaunt frame is stooped, believing its great height, his face is weather-beaten and lined, but his eyes are bright and light up with a twinkle when something strikes him funny.

"Yep, I'm the last of the Craggs. Ain't no one else of that name, even, anywhere around here. Wouldn't set me down for being over eighty, would ye? I used to be six foot one and weigh over two hundred pounds. But darned if I ain't shrunk. I ain't over six feet now and

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I don't weigh but a hundred and fifty. Why ain't I ever married? Heh! heh! You might a-guessed why by looking at me. But 't ain't no secret.

“When I was young I want quite so dum humly as I be now. When I put b'ar's grease on my boots and more on my hair to make it lay back slick I wa'n't such a hard lookin' character - at least I don't think I was. I used to beau the girls 'round quite a bit, too. But father was taken poorly. And he got to worrying about what was going to happen to mother and the family if he passed on. I was the oldest of the family, and he got me to promise that I would stay to hum and look after mother and the boys if anything happened to him. I promised. And father up and died. I carried on the farm with the boy's boys' help. And I was dum busy. I didn't care to sit up all night goin' to dances, and my girl friends got to going with somebody else. By and by they married. So did my brothers and I stayed home looking after mother. She didn't die 'til I was past seventy, and the rheumatiz had kind of sot in here and there, so I figgered my marrying days was over. Don't think I shall ever get ambition enough to marry, so, fur's I can see, I'm the last of the Craggs.

2

“I've lived all my life on this mountain farm. It was home-steaded by my ancestors before they called it homesteading. My folks way back settled here before the Revolution, and the land has been in the hands of the Craggs ever since. Course that ain't any record for Northfield. I know a coupla families whose folks settled here long before the Revolution when the king owned the land. They don't have any deed to their land, got it by a grant from the king.

“Near as we can figger it out, part of this house is the same one that my folks way back built. We figgered they first built a cabin, then added to it. Kept building on rooms as they needed 'em, and finally they built on the upper storey - or their children, or grandchildren did. Don't suppose the addition that my father built on would be considered much in these days - the bay winders and the porches, and that jig saw stuff around for ornaments. We thought it was pretty fine when it was first done, though. He was hoping to get money

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enough ahead so's he could spare a little and build a kind of a silo on the corner with a candle snuffer for a roof - a round tower, you know. That would have been real toney. But he never got 'round to it.

"No, they ain't much money in farming - cash money, I mean. The way I figger it, no one ever made any money on these farms by farming. They made it in real estate. First, a feller would get tired of living somewheres - too many people around, prob'ly, and he'd take up a farm out in the wilderness, cut down the trees and build 3 a cabin. He'd plant a few crops, work a sugar bush p'raps, but he'd depend pretty heavy on the hunting for fresh meat. He could sell his sugar for enough to get powder and shot. And that, with the skins of the animals he'd shot, or trapped gave him all the cash money he ever see. 'Course, other people moved in around him. The hunting goes worse the more that come, and mebbe he couldn't get enough cash money to keep himself in rum. He wants to get out. He can't take his place with him. But as people are moving in all the time, he can sell. And sell it he does. That gives him a block of real cash money, the biggest he ever had in his life. That's when the feller was lucky enough to move into a place where other people came. That feller made money. But if he'd got into a place that he couldn't sell - even if 't was a better farm - he'd a-been stuck. That's why I say that farmers that make any money make it in real estate and not in farming.

"Course in a way farmers are better off than city folks though it depends on what you mean by being well off. If you have to make money to be happy the farm is no place to live. Most people seem to think that they have to have money in order to buy something that they can get without any money on the farm. What I mean is, yer never hear of a farmer starving to death, or freezing either. He don't have to run around looking for a job nuther. 'Course, a farmer could freeze if he was such a dum fool that he wouldn't cut the wood on his own place. And I suppose he could starve if he didn't know enough to put 4 in his crops. And he could come dum near croakin' if he didn't know enough to keep everlastingly at things. But, if a feller liken to work, and work for himself, he can p'rob'ly

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enjoy life more on a farm than he can anywhere else. 't ain't no place for a lazy man, though.

“Course in the old days a farm was a pretty tough place. It's a lot better now than it was as far as amusement is concerned. What with the radio and the automobile the farm isn't half bad. But we had fun in our day, too. We didn't go through life with no fun at all, you can bet.

“Prob'ly the best fun we had that the young people don't have now was husking bees. You know about them? Well, the big idea was to get somebody's corn husked. Instead of working at it, we played at it. But the work got done just the same. The idea of the game was simple enough. A bushel of the unhusked ears were dumped before each player and an empty basket was provided to place the husked ears in. ‘Course, the bee was held in the barn, which was all lighted up with lanterns hanging from the beams, and the place made extra neat. If a feller found a red ear when he was husking his pile, it was a ticket that allowed him to go down the line and kiss all the girls. If a girl found one, she could go and kiss all the fellers - but she didn't. No sir, she hid it, or tucked it under some feller's pile. 't was dum funny how many red ears they was in just ordinary corn. ‘Course, what happened was that the fellers would save the red ears from other huskings - even kept ‘em from other years - and would arrive at a husking with 5 a bag full. The feller that was giving the husking would see to it that they was plenty of red ears in his corn, too.

“I don't remember as we each went and got our girls as we did when they was a dance. Most generally we took a big wagon and put hay, or straw, in the bottom of it, with plenty of buffeler robes on top, and then drove around and got everybody. The robes come from the West. Lots of us had buffeler coats, too. Wore ‘em 'til the hair was all gone in patches, and holes got worn clean through the hide. You don't see any of ‘em nowadays, but they was cheap then.

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“After we got the corn all husked we was invited into the house to have a bite to eat. And they was always plenty - regular church sociable layout. I don't remember much what 't was, 'cept pies and cakes and nuts and cider afterwards when we played games. All kinds of apples they was too, Porters and Northern Spies, and Blue Pearmains. Those Blue Pearmains seem to have all disappeared. They was a large apple, sweet, but a good flavor. They had a tough skin, though, and the skin was blue. That is, they was a kind of blue powder on it that you could rub off. And then the apple was bright red.

“None of the old folks had any teeth, them days. So, course, they couldn't bite apples without peeling 'em. It used to be quite a stunt to see who could peel an apple without breaking the skin. Most anybody could do it if they used a Pearmain. And then the stunt was to see who had the longest peel. 'Course, to cut a long peel, the feller'd have to cut it thinner. 'Nother thing they'd do would be to peel an apple, cuttin' pretty deep. Then they'd cut around the core and wind the peel back, making it look like a whole apple again. They'd put it in with the others and watch somebody try to pick it 6 up. There was another way to fool them. We'd take a big needle and some strong thread and sew around the middle of the apple, putting the needle back in again where it broke the skin coming out-so the thread would be all the way 'round the apple just under the skin, and the skin not damaged much. When we got round to where we started, we'd pull both ends of the thread, and weld cut that apple in two, under the skin. When we got done, we'd polish up the apple and put it with the others, handy, and watch for some apple peeler to tackle that one. When he come to the center in his peeling the dum thing would fly in two, and he'd be out of the peelin' race that time.

“I dunno as all these things would work today with the bright electric lights. Best light we had was dim compared to them. But we didn't miss the bright lights none - specially in playing post office which was a regular stand-by at all parties - and is yet, so I hear, though.

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“We used to play 'spin the Platter' too. That game gives you a good chance to show off how graceful you are. I've seen fellers, and girls too, bend over to pick up the platter and be so dum awkward that they'd kick the thing before they could reach it with their hands. When a feller plain fell down, he was generally helped out by some 'smart Alec' tripping him up. Guess some of us was real devils. We used to embarass embarrass the girls by shying one of those white buttons such as they used for underwear out into the middle of the ring when same girl stooped over. My! but wouldn't they blush! One feller improved on this by tearing his handkerchief in two with a loud rip when one bent 7 over. He got sat on for that. It wasn't considered funny. It was vulgar.

“Yes, we held hands and put our arms around the girls when we got a chance. But it was always on the sly. We never drank liquor the way the young folks do now, so they tell me. The old folks used to sit in the kitchen and play cards and drink hard cider. But us fellers never drank a drop. And, if any of the girls did we didn't know it. That would have finished them. No staying out til 'till all hours of the nights either. Ten o'clock was considered real late. And every party broke up at that time.”

At this point Mr. Cragg poured himself a generous glass of hard cider from the antique pitcher before him, and set down his glass with geometrical precision on the checkered table cloth. After due consideration of the small bubbles appearing from nowhere and floating up through the amber liquid to burst at the top with a slight hiss and an entrancing aroma, he said with a twinkle, “You see, I'm one of the old folks now so I can drink the hard stuff. Don't have to worry about the girls not liking it.”