



# NEWSLETTER

BRUNSWICK COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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LESSER KNOWN FARM CROPS  
FRANK E. GALLOWAY, EDITOR

When one thinks of historical crops that have been grown in Brunswick County, rice, tobacco, and peanuts quickly come to mind. Some of the lesser known crops, namely sugarcane, chufa, and velvet bean have also played a major role in pre-nineteenth century agriculture in our county.

Sugarcane provided the raw source of a major day to day staple; cane syrup drenched over a hot biscuit was eaten at most meals by almost everyone. The sight of tall stalks of sugarcane blowing in the wind was a very common scene at every farm. Yet today, one be hard pressed to find a single stalk of cane in the entire county.

Several varieties of sugarcane were planted. Two of the most prolific types, Blue Ribbon and Louisiana cane, had to be propagated asexually. In other words, these two varieties did not flower and therefore did not produce seeds. The farmer was required to bank or store the stalks of these two varieties much as one would store sweet potatoes.

The third variety, sorghum cane, did flower and did not require banking of the stalks. The stalks of sorghum cane were much smaller in size than Blue Ribbon or Louisiana cane and has a far lesser sugar content.

Blue Ribbon cane has a very large stalk with a reddish-purple coloration. This variety was the preferred cane because of its high sugar content. Louisiana cane had a somewhat smaller stalk than Blue Ribbon and lacked the purple coloration. The stalks of Louisiana cane grew taller than either of the other two varieties.

All three varieties were harvested in the fall of the year just prior to the first frost. The canes were stripped of the foliage or fodder as it was commonly called. The stalks were cut and hauled to a cane mill which crushed the stalk causing the juice to flow out. The cane mill was a machine that consisted of a series of rollers and was turned by a mule traveling around in a circle.

As soon as a sufficient quantity of juice was obtained, the cooking process began. The juice was poured into a shallow pan or vat and cooked over a slow fire for a long period of time. This process drove off the excess water and thickened the juice into syrup. Once the syrup began to cool, it was poured into containers and stored for future use.

Crushing the cane was a community affair. Several neighbors would get together, cut their own cane, and bring it to a centrally located mill. While the men were crushing the cane and cooking the syrup, the women would prepare a large meal for the men. In a sense, "making syrup" was not only a necessity, but also an opportunity for a social gathering.

Another crop which few people are aware of that was grown in the county is chufa. Chufa is a spanish word meaning ground almond. *Cyperus esculentus* has also been called earth almond, ground nut, tiger nut, duck potato, and edible rush. It is a peanut like tuber which grows underground on fibrous roots of a nutsedge plant. The tubers are used for seed much as the tubers of Irish potatoes. Here again, it was not practical to propagate this plant from seeds.

The chufa was cultivated for food for both men and hogs. The tubers contain protein, carbohydrates, sugars, and lots of oil. Years ago, farmers planted chufas to fatten their hogs on. This crop was generally planted in recently cleared land to help mellow the soil. When the hogs rooted up the ground in search of the chufas, this further helped clear the land.

Pork that was fed chufas was very tasty much as a peanut fed hog is. The lard from these hogs did not harden and local folks regarded this as a good sign.

The last of the lesser known crops which this newsletter will address is the velvet bean. The velvet bean is a legume that produces tons of green leaves per acre. The leaves do not decay readily, even when killed by frost. The beans and pods are also very long lasting even in wet winter weather. The velvet bean was used as a protein supplement for livestock during the winter months. Farmers grew the bean generally on corn stalks for support and then turned their livestock on this after Christmas when other grazing had been exhausted.

When one thinks of the history of an area, important men, places, and battles come to mind. However, agricultural crops influence history as much as the aforementioned events. When we forget the role that these crops played, we are actually losing a part of our heritage.

## CURRENT CONCERNS

The next meeting of the Brunswick County Historical Society will be Monday evening, February 9, at 7:30 in the Fellowship Hall of Shallotte Presbyterian Church. The program will feature Dr. John McNeil, formerly of Brunswick County. He is now a resident and well known historian in Columbus County.

Members will please remember that 1987 dues are payable to our secretary, Lottie Ludlum; our sale of note cards should be completed as soon as possible. Any member who did not get notes to sell, please consult Gwen Causey. Also, keep in mind that we have some information sheets to use in inviting prospective members.

Be alert for public television programs of history to be presented this spring. Consult schedules.

The Regional History Bowl for eighth graders was held at Fort Fisher January 31. On March 8 this fort will be the site of the Living History Encampment 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Some time in the future Fort Fisher will display a steam engine and paddle wheel shaft from the sunken Steamboat Spray in Northeast Cape Fear River. The Luzon Bell is already there after being displayed in Albany, New York, for several decades. This bell was taken from Fort Fisher in 1865 by New York troops.

In last September the North Carolina Museum of History was authorized to design a history museum building with underground parking facility.

Louisburg College is having its 200th birthday party this school year of 1986-87. Louisburg is the first church-related junior college in America to celebrate its bicentennial.

The International Sir Walter Raleigh Conference will be held at Wilson Library UNC-Chapel Hill March 27-28. Historians from England and several American states will be present for programs emphasizing Raleigh and his career.

Dr. Thomas Loftfield of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of UNC Wilmington presented a slide lecture at New Hanover County Museum on January 14. He discussed archaeological evidence uncovered by a field school study on Bald Head Island.

As Historical Society members, we are concerned with discovering and preserving information about the Cape Fear Area, and particularly about Brunswick County. We may encourage our friends and our organizations to keep good records and to store them in safe places. Our Society Directors are eager to enlarge our collections and to provide better storage facilities.

The Society Directors have discussed means of informing the public concerning our purposes and programs; hopefully some progress will be possible in this area. Society members may well be ambassadors in their own communities.

Our 1987 meetings will be February 9, May 11, August 10, and November 9.