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Luther Hill corn seeds sold in Holland were planted in France as well as here in Sussex County

**Jennie
Sweetman**

LOCAL HISTORY



By JENNIE SWEETMAN

jennie@warwick.net

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ANDOVER -- The late Luther Hill would be pleased.

The corn that Hill propagated in Andover in 1902 is now being grown by a resident from France with seeds that she obtained from a grower in Holland.

Sylvain Michelet, of France, learned about the corn from a Dutch neighbor who had obtained the seeds from Holland and gave her a few of them so that she, too, could plant them. Michelet then went on the internet to find information about sweet corn. To her surprise, she found an article about Hill and corn that appeared in the Oct. 24, 2009, edition of the New Jersey Herald.

According to Michelet, this is the first year that she is planting the seed that her neighbor obtained from Vreeken Zaden from Dordrecht, Holland. Michelet advises that when sweet corn seeds are planted, the farmer is supposed to save one ear from the crop and use it the following year, which is something they can't do with the few varieties sold in France as they are hybrids and hard to find. French people typically don't eat corn except for popcorn, which they buy pre-made.

On the Vreeken's Zaden webpage, the sugar maze Luther Hill Corn is described as, "A rare, but valuable white variety from 1902, cultivated by Luther Hill from Andover Township (Sussex). This historic variety gives two to five side shoots with two flasks each; so give

each plant space (40-50 cm). The cobs are balanced sweet, note: historic corn is only two to three weeks at its best; so don't harvest it too late. Furthermore: eat it quickly after harvesting; waiting reduces taste. Bad summers are endured well, so a very good breed for Northern Europe. Once you have tasted a sweet land race (at the optimum moment) you no longer need a modern sugar-sweet hybrid."

The instructions note that sowing time is from May to June. A word of caution advises to "Beware! Other corn nearby influences the sweet content. Harvest: 75 days after planting."

Ton Vreden advised they have carried Luther Hill sweet corn in stock since 2013 and have reproduced it since then. He failed to elaborate on what prompted them to import and to sell a seed that was propagated over a century ago in the United States.

A quick peek on the internet reflects that numerous seed companies in the U.S. advertise Luther Hill Corn, 1902, Andover. It is highly unlikely, however, that any Luther Hill corn will be sold commercially this year in Sussex County, the birthplace of the Luther Hill Sweet Corn.

In 2009, Betty Bishoff Mitchell, a lifelong Sussex County resident, conceived the idea of planting Luther Hill sweet corn seeds on the Hill gravesite. Mitchell explained that as a young child, she enjoyed the Luther Hill sweet corn and she looked forward to corn season.

Obtaining the needed approvals and placing fencing around it to ward off any critters, especially raccoons that reportedly love it, her project was a success and the corn not only grew, but produced ears of corn too. She obtained the seed from George Fetzer who sold the Luther Hill sweet corn at his Valley View farm stand on Route 206 just outside of Newton.

So, who was Luther Hill?

While much is known about Luther Hill, what isn't known is what prompted him to develop the corn credited as the first of the silver corn variety, his breeding of the corn and the techniques used in doing so.

As for Hill, he was born on March 9, 1834, in Green Township to Samuel and Elsie Wilcox Hill. After obtaining his elementary education at the Huntsville School, he continued his studies at Edward S. Stiles' Academy (later known as Mount Retirement Seminary) in Wantage Township. At age 19, Hill commenced his career in education by teaching in the Springdale School.

Hill then alternated teaching and merchandising. A versatile man, Hill engaged in several professions such as storekeeper, educator, farmer and the first tax collector of Andover Township. After teaching for about two years, he began clerking in the S.R. White and Joseph Hill general store in Andover. From 1855 to 1872, Hill entered into partnership in a general store in Andover with his brother-in-law, Nathan Stackhouse. He then disposed of the store and spent two years teaching in the Andover School.

Also a civic leader, Hill was a founding member of the county Nature Study Club, the county Historical Society, a member of the county Agriculture Society and served as a director of the Sussex National Bank. A lifelong member of the Andover Presbyterian Church, Hill served many years as its Sunday school superintendent, as well as a trustee and an elder of the church. When Andover Borough was formed, Hill became one of its first councilmen.

On Feb. 2, 1876, Hill was appointed as the county superintendent of schools, a position that he held until 1902. During his 27-year tenure, Hill visited each school in the county twice annually with the trips made by horse and buggy. Hill maintained an office in his home, writing all of his reports in longhand, and had no assistant or secretary.

Upon his retirement, Hill devoted all of his time to his small farm and orchard. He then propagated the Luther Hill sweet corn for which he still enjoys name recognition. Hill, his wife, Melinda Stackhouse, and their three daughters resided in a dwelling called Fern Hill that Hill built shortly following his Nov. 18, 1857, marriage to Stackhouse.

Hill passed away Dec. 30, 1924, at age 90 with his funeral held in his home on Jan. 2, 1925. Despite a blinding snowstorm, his body was conveyed from his home, through his own orchard and to the cemetery that adjoined it.

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Jennie Sweetman is the history columnist for the New Jersey Herald. She may be contacted at jenniee@warwick.net.