



CORN? FIDDLESTICKS!

By Frank Bryan

Last summer the State Department of Agriculture conducted a statewide public survey on what the Vermont state vegetable should be. It thereby earned the bureaucratic "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic" award for 1984.

Vermont, like many other states seems to have a need to "officialize" things. We have named a State tree (sugar maple), a State animal (Morgan horse), a State insect (honeybee), and a State bird (Hermit Thrush). Bill Mares and I have suggested that the "Real Vermonter's" State bird would more likely be the Geesum Crow and that the State tree should be the white birch, since it is so easy to sell it to flatlanders who think it burns as well as it looks.

Corn was the winner of last summer's poll for State vegetable.

CORN?

Beans!

Corn is yellow. Corn has evolved into dozens of hybrids—there is no real corn left. Corn is cultivated, fertilized, and packaged. Corn is frittered and creamed. Corn is almost always fenced in.

Corn is August, the most depressing month of the year in Vermont since it is the best month and leaves us precious little to look forward to. What follows corn? Winter follows corn, that's what. Corn is Iowa. Corn is Illinois. Corn is even shaped like Illinois, long and thin. Corn is a vegetable of the heartland, the (perish the thought!) flatlands!

In July of 1984, I made my nomination for state vegetable known before a Conference of teachers of Vermont's heritage at the University of Vermont. Vermont's state vegetable must be wild and free. It must be uncultivated, hard to find. It must be a spring vegetable, like asparagus or rhubarb. It must be a vegetable that makes little children shudder because it tastes so awful. Most of all, it must be green, like the mountains that shade it.

Corn says, "Eat me. I'm warm and delicious with melted butter and I'm easily grown in straight rows and even more easily cooked in a variety of ways. You can find me anywhere, anytime of the

year. Even cows like me." Vermont's State vegetable should say, "You've got to find me first. And when you do, I doubt you'll like me. That suits me just fine. I grow alone. Gardens are like cities, full of lots of varieties all kept in their little places, all trained and weeded and cultivated. I come in only one variety and you can eat me when I say you can and not a week sooner or later.

"You've got to find me first. And when you do, I doubt you'll like me."

The fiddlehead fern.

Lettuce reason together about this. There is not a kernel of truth in the argument that the fiddlehead would cause an international crisis with New Brunswick, even though it is featured on their coat of arms. Besides, if it comes to war, the Republic of Vermont has amply demonstrated its capacity to defeat Canada and/or the British Empire in armed conflict. We beet them once, we can do it again.

The real enemies of the fiddlehead fern are within our own borders. Some claim, for instance, that this noble vegetable is carcinogenic. So what else is new?

Others claim that throngs of flatlanders will be lost looking for the ferns in the forest and swamps of early spring; that their plaintive cries will disturb mothering wildlife and upset Vermont's delicate ecosystem. Still a third group cautions against adoption of the fiddlehead as the State vegetable because it might cause an editorial war between the Burlington *Free Press* and the Rutland *Herald* and place great numbers of citizens in both these fine cities in danger of death by boredom.

Other dangers are more real. Will it trigger the political instincts of our Congressman, Jim Jeffords, and lead him to try to make the fiddlehead fern the National vegetable in the same way he tried to force our bottle ban law on the rest of the Nation? Will Governor Madeleine Kunin become disoriented trying to figure out how to come down on both sides of

the issue? Will former Governor Dick Snelling grow moody because he can't convince anyone that he thought of it first? Will Senator Leahy demand a town meeting vote? Will the State vegetable end up on the Bob Newhart show?

Although the legislative leadership has tried to squash the debate, the question of the state vegetable keeps sprouting up. It is time for Vermonters to insist that their legislative leaders weed out the extraneous issues and get on with naming a state vegetable before a mass of outraged citizens turnip on the statehouse lawn in Montpelier.

Enough. There is something to think about here. Something important. The array of official Vermont symbols reflects our culture. It says something about who we think we are. And who we think we are will have much to do with what we become.

"April," T. S. Elliot said in *The Wasteland* "is the cruelest month, Breeding Lilacs of the dead land, Mixing memory and desire, Stirring dull roots with spring rain." And so it is that Vermont is the cruelest state, reminding us always of the unyielding mix of nature's land and human desire, human memory. That is why it is the most glorious state, the most human and as Robert Frost said, "one of the two best" (New Hampshire was the other) to live in.

Every spring about the time the sound of the peepers comes back to the marsh along Big Hollow Road where I live in Starksboro, a strange car appears parked on a weekend afternoon along the roadway in the darkest part of the hollow. Across the way where the hillside meets the valley floor, two or three people can be seen searching for something, bending and stooping and standing again. They are after fiddleheads. Their instincts have been stirred by memory and desire and they are working out that fine balance between the natural and civilized world, that cruel reminder that hope is all that is promised the human race. The fiddlehead fern is nothing without the people who search it out. Together they are everything. They are Vermont. ■