## Starke Tidbit No. 51 ---- Muck

Attached are photos from a program book for the 1944 Muck Crop Show in North Judson. (The whole book is on our website.) The one photo shows the school gymnasium with tables full of produce from the farms in the area. The photo with the "after harvest" arch is of the 1914 Jubilee in North Judson. The folks in North Judson enjoy celebrating.

I bring this up now, because the Muck Crop Show was a precursor to today's **Mint Festival** in North Judson. Starke County has a lot of Muck soils, and they are more prevalent in the southwestern part of the county. Mint grows well in muck soils, and the **Mint Festival** offers a tour of mint farms on Saturday, June 15, at 2:00 p.m. during the Festival. You will see how they cook the mint and extract the oil from the plant.

Over the years, we have farmed some Muck fields, and following are some of the things that I have learned about Muck:

- 1. **Muck is highly organic.** It has been formed from lake beds or other depressions and has taken hundreds of years to form as much as 500 years to form 12 inches of Muck. Normal mineral soils may have 1 to 4 % of organic matter, but Muck soils will have from 20 to 80 % of organic matter. Muck will hold one inch of water per foot of soil, almost double the amount that mineral soils can hold. This allows the crop to go without rain a lot longer. Muck soils can be shallow (less than one foot deep) or deep (maybe five or six feet deep in Starke County).
- 2. **Muck can be warm or cold.** When the sun comes out on the black Muck soil, the seeds that have just been planted will germinate quickly. However, the Kankakee Valley area (from South Bend to Momence, IL) is the coldest area in the State. Starke County farm crops will freeze sooner in the spring or fall than the crops South of us or North of us. Obviously, as one gets closer to the south part of the state, the temperatures will be warmer. But the lands North of us are warmer than the Kankakee Valley because of the Lake Michigan effect. Plus, Muck soils are usually in the lower elevations of our area than the mineral soils (cold air settles). So it is not uncommon for corn growing on Muck soils to have a late spring frost in May.
- 3. **Muck oxidizes**. As Muck is drained, the combination of air and sunlight oxidizes the Muck and the soil will settle. An engineer friend of mine, fresh out of Purdue, started to work for William Gehring (advertized on the attachment). The first thing he did was to establish bench marks around one of the Muck farms. Over the years, he kept track of these elevations. When he retired 45 years later, he again checked the elevations. In those 45 years, the Muck had settled 45 inches because of the drainage and tillage of the soil.
- 4. **Muck burns**. The soil is so organic that it can catch on fire. Lightning, a farmer burning a brush pile near or on Muck, or a cigarette thrown from a car near a dry ditch bank, all can cause a fire in Muck. Once Muck starts to burn, it is very difficult to stop it. Usually, a fire department can't supply enough water to extinguish the fire. It may burn for weeks. Sometimes the only way to stop a Muck fire is to flood the field or at least raise the water table.

Jim Shilling, President Starke County Historical Society







