



### **The Black Hawk Cornsheller**

By: Rubye Patch

Asahel Huntington Patch was a "damned" Yankee. Damned because in 1875 when he arrived in his adopted, war-ravaged southern town, Clarksville, Tennessee, Asahel had no friends. Not only was he a Yankee, he was a Republican. Born November 18, 1825 in Hamilton, Massachusetts, a bit above Boston, Asahel--later known as A. H.--came from a long line of tenacious and determined hard working Puritans. He was even named for one, Asahel Huntington of Topsfield, Massachusetts (1761-1813) a kindly minister in the Congregational Church, a Puritan off-shoot.

The First surviving of nine children born to Capt. Daniel and Elisabeth Gould Patch of Hamilton-Wenham-Ipswich (Daniel intermittently resided in each), young Asahel early assumed family responsibilities. As a mere boy on his father's rocky, coastal farm, he was charged with feeding the poultry--chickens, geese and ducks. Shelling with his toughened, infantile fingers those hard, flinty New England ears, Asahel daydreamed he would invent, one day, a portable corn sheller so efficient it could shell corn with ease and so inexpensive every small farmer could afford it.

Time passed. In the early 1840's when he was yet a teen, Asahel struck out on his own. He walked to Boston some 30 miles south where he put himself in the employ of a grocer, perhaps a relative. The business agreement was (1) during the day Asahel would deliver groceries in a pushcart; (2) in the evening sweep out the store; (3) and finally at nightfall, sleep under the counter so he could rise early the next morning to get a fresh start.

The boy's diligence, energy and punctuality soon caught the eye of one of his customers to whom he delivered goods--Mr. Oliver Ames, a businessman. Although Ames resided in Easton, south of Boston, his sales office was in Boston's Quincy Market occupying the entire top floor. From here Ames shipped every farm implement imaginable, all made in his nearby factories--including hoes, shovels, rakes, large corn shellers and eventually, plows. (Ames Plow Tavern today is situated in the same Quincy Market space).

Ames bargained to apprentice the "boy" in his Worcester factory for three years for the sum of \$60.00 per annum plus room and board. An expressed stipulation was that the boy must supply his own clothes. Patch agreed. Mr. Ames was not disappointed. In three years' time Patch was the factory superintendent.

Yet, early in the 1850's the call to "Go West, Young Man"--a byline attributed to Horace Greeley, founder of 'The New Yorker' magazine--tugged at Patch, body and soul. Like many single young men and others of the 50's, Patch traveled as far as Pittsburg by rail, then down the Ohio to Louisville. With employers' recommendations in his pocket, Patch was hired by Miller and Wingate, then a large seed and implement company near the river. He interested these owners in developing a grass and grain cutting machine, the Kentucky Harvester. Forerunner of today's combine, the Back in Hamilton, one year after Asahel and Sarah's New Hampshire marriage, their first little one, Fanny Elizabeth, came along on Jun 24, 1860. She was named for her maternal aunt, Fanny Elizabeth Marsh who took a fancy not only to her but to all of her Patch nieces and nephews, staying whenever possible among them in Louisville, Oak Park, Ill and later in Clarksville. Often traveling abroad in summers, Aunt Fanny brought back for these little rascals, treasures which once included a few sprigs of Kenilworth ivy, today causing an ever-expanding vexation as they climb Clarksville brick

walls. During the school year Aunt Fanny taught at a female academy, situated near her nephew's, George Marsh Patch, Oak Park home where she set up residence. Between sessions, she made her welcomed plump self at home with her sister, Sarah Patch, dying in Clarksville on Home Avenue, September 1910. With the Marsh name inscribed on the backside of Patch's Greenwood monument, Aunt Fanny rests peacefully in the fair city of Clarksville.

'Twas not always so. Her mischievous grandnephew, Asahel Huntington Patch II (there were two such grandfather namesakes, the other in Oak Park, Ill), knew how morbidly afraid of snakes was Aunt Fanny. One summer night after family and neighbors were a-bed, Clarksville's Asahel II plotted to place in Aunt Fanny's chamber pot a seltzer tablet, somewhat akin to today's Alka-Seltzer. Around two a.m. when Aunt Fanny made use of that commodity, the sizzle from the seltzer catapulted her into the hall, down the stairs and out into the street, shrieking as she fled, "snakes, snakes!". For the now-wide-awake neighborhood, hysterical Aunt Fanny clad in flimsy nightgown and cap must have created a comical sight. (Subsequent reward for this playful namesake was a New England rod of correction. As it was for Asahel II's making a spectacle of his two-year-old first cousin, West Humphreys who was asleep in his grandfather's Home Avenue upstairs bedroom. Like a circus barker, Asahel II called neighborhood children to see the six toes on each tiny foot of the baby. Asahel was making good money--two cents per head--until A. H. discovered the plot. You know the rest of the story).

After birth of Fanny Elizabeth came the Louisville birth of George Marsh Patch in 1862. Because George Marsh, Sarah's brother--had met an untimely death in Kentucky it might be assumed he was a casualty during the recent bloody Battle of Perryville. But Uncle George was no soldier. A year earlier he had graduated from Dartmouth (Phi Beta Kappa) and had been hired by Bardstown, Kentucky's Methodist Academy's headmaster, John Atkinson. While living in the Atkinson home, George contracted a wicked disease, perhaps diphtheria and died. Buried in Bardstown by the side of John and his New Hampshire-born bride, a Marsh kinswoman, George Marsh is also commemorated back home in Claremont with a stone placed beside the grave of his mother, Mehitable Hubbard Marsh, which is in Christ Episcopal churchyard.

Post war, the Ohio River re-opened for southern export. Business boomed. Benjamin Avery, manufacturer of the now famous Avery plow, owned an immense foundry, his warehouse during the war having been taken over as a Union hospital. Avery apparently had lost most of his fortune. Patch, on the other hand, had managed to hoard most of his. So Avery convinced A. H. in 1866 to go into plow business with him as a silent partner. Under these two master industrialists, the firm in only three years had made a great deal of money. Patch, thinking he had saved enough for a lifetime, opted to retire back in his hometown, Hamilton, Massachusetts. In 1868, Benjamin Avery Patch, Patch's fourth and last child was born there. Patch's third child, a daughter, Mary Ellen had been born in nearby Wenham possibly while Sarah was visiting A. H.'s two spinster sisters, Martha Ellen and Mary Gould.

At any rate, when Patch revealed to Avery his wish to retire, Avery had a statement of business made out and asked Patch to name a satisfactory sum of settlement. The amount named by Patch was rejected by Avery on the grounds that it was entirely "TOO LITTLE". He in turn, suggested a sum which Patch firmly refused on the grounds that it was "TOO MUCH". So these two fast friends and business associates were deadlocked for weeks. A settlement was only effected when a third party mediated.

The 1870 Hamilton, Massachusetts Essex County census finds Asahel farming, no doubt, happily. He, in a now relaxed atmosphere, tinkered with, produced and patented in 1872 his first corn sheller--post mounted. Nothing more is known of this model although it was featured in an 1872 issue of "Scientific American".

On the verge of becoming a renowned inventor, Patch unfortunately and uncharacteristically made not one but several unwise investments. Among them was a frivolous but final bid on "the most beautiful country estate in the whole of New England". His carefree retirement suddenly ballooned into a daily struggle to pay bills, even small ones. Patch had to go back to work.

In 1875, Patch located a plow factory in a northern Tennessee town, Clarksville on the Cumberland. It was owned at the time by William Douglas Meriwether of Woodstock, father of Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, AKA Dorothy Dix, the journalist who at her 1950 death was the most widely-read newspaperwoman in the world. Patch and Meriwether formed a partnership, Meriwether and Patch Plow Co. The firm, site of Clarksville's Riverside Drive Sherwin Williams Paint, had no ups and downs, only downs. Even if war-impoverished Montgomery County farmers could have afforded a new plow, they wouldn't have bought it from Patch, a Yankee, for Goodness sake! After ten lean and struggling years the factory closed.

No money, no job, few friends (remember he was also a Republican) and now a senior citizen 60 years old, Patch sat down at his kitchen table and thought, "I'll make me a corn sheller!" With faith, skill, patience and a pocket knife, Patch meticulously whittled small pieces of kindling wood snatched from behind the cook stove, sticking them together with beeswax from the honey jar. Sarah, upon noticing all these shavings on and under her table, must have exclaimed, "Get out of my kitchen!"

Escaping to the coal shed behind his 5th Street residence, Patch toiled until his wooden model was ready to be cast in iron at Whitfield-Bates' Foundry which voluntarily offered him credit. A former employee, Mack Dix, worked with Patch whether or not he could be paid and teenage Benjamin Patch was the errand boy. Benjamin peddled the experimental sheller up and down Public Square, first to Henry Fretch's store and then to Fox and Smith Hardware. A leading merchant in those days, Fretch, rather gruff and austere, but with kind impulses and few words merely asked in one breath, "How much does the old man say they are worth? Take a dozen". Knowing the "Old Man" probably needed cash, Fretch, taking his cigar out of his mouth, called after the boy, "I'll pay now".

At Smith and Fox Hardware, overly enthusiastic Benjamin picked up a monkey wrench and tightened the main bolt so well, the machine broke right in half! Smith, coughing up tobacco juice he had swallowed during the excitement, garbled, "Boy, go home and tell the "Old Man" that if he can make a sheller strong enough to show a few customers, I'll buy a dozen".

The "Old Man" sent Benjamin galloping back to Captain Smith, "Papa said he will make a sheller so strong that if any part breaks or wears out, he will replace free!" This was the beginning of a guarantee as well as slogan under which Black Hawk Corn Sheller was sold from 1886 when it was first patented until 1954 when Patch Foundry closed.

Patch sheller business was on Public Square, first in Lui Heimansohn building (now site of F&M Bank) then in Coutts Row on corner of Main Street, still standing. In 1898 Patch built his own Drane Street Foundry behind his Home Avenue house, sites which are both now property of APSU. Selling a million shellers per year, Patch added a grist mill in 1900. The sheller was sold worldwide--in every country where corn is grown--Russia, Hungary, Brazil, Egypt, Italy, Australia, South Africa, France, Turkey, Argentina, China, India, Siberia as well as southeaster U.S. states.

Note of interest: John Catlett, one of Patch's grandsons volunteered at age 26 or 27 for WWI and was assigned to ambulance duty in France. After a midnight run, homesick and extremely tired, John stopped at a remote barn to snooze until morning. Using straw for a pillow, he awoke with the sun shining on a Black Hawk corn sheller only three feet from his head! John decided France was not so far away, after all.

The 1886 Black Hawk corn sheller model won the top industrial award at the Columbus Exposition in Chicago. The 1903 model did the same in the St. Louis Exposition. The only complaint was "It don't pick out the rotten kernels". And dealers said it never wore out. Patch not only replaced occasional parts to shellers but also paid shipping charges.

Patch kept no time clock. On Saturdays, employees simply reported to A.H. their number of hours worked that week. And if business slowed, Patch, rather than laying off his force, hired them to make repairs, new construction, alterations. These talented men took a great deal of interest in beautifying the grounds, building a tennis court and planting an orchard. A generation later, an apple tree caused neighborhood children consternation when Asahel Huntington Patch II ran them off with a stick. In their stab to pronounce "Asahel", they mistakenly called this bachelor grandson a two-syllable un-nice word.

So as a white-bearded old man, A. H. Patch's boyhood dream had come to fruition. Dying suddenly after having consumed a whole mincemeat pie, New England recipe, January 29, 1909, A. H. was finally respected esteemed by all who knew him. Listed among his pallbearers is every prominent (and southern) Clarksville businessman's name.

And all four of the former Yankee's children who married southerners are buried in Clarksville's Greenwood Cemetery:

1. Fanny Elizabeth married land owner John Crittendon Catlett, who died at age 50. A. H. then took into his Home Avenue household, Fanny and her five "annuals", so called because of Fanny's love of growing both children and flowers. Patch sent them all to Southwestern Presbyterian University, forerunner of APSU.
2. George Marsh Patch married Mary Meriwether, daughter of A.H.'s plow partner, William Douglas Meriwether and sister to "Dear Dorothy Dix".

3. Mary Ellen married Robert West Humphreys whose family's home place is now site of APSU's Dunn Center, at one time known as Pettus Park. Humphreys County is named for Rober West Humphrey's grandfather.
4. Benjamin Avery married Mary Morris Green, daughter of William Henry Green of Ringgold. Green, witnessed Lee's surrender and was one of the first four Clarksville Confederates to arrive home after the war. He and the other three Clarksvillians who were also at Appomattox walked to Richmond and then to Baltimore. Clarksville tobacconist Hugh Dunlop who happened to be in Baltimore put them on a southbound train.

The thread of Patch's philosophy still rings true among his descendants. "Persevere, persevere, and persevere"! Patch believed as did a later indomitable spirit, Winston Churchill, "never, never, never give up!"