

# Progressive berry matriarch remembered

## Assistant recalls the achievements of a remarkable woman

by Darlene Bakhoun  
Community News staff

**BROWNS MILLS** - Elizabeth White's life meant more than just blueberry cultivation.

"She was a woman far ahead of her time," former assistant to White, June Vail said.

Vail, 83, worked for White as an assistant under a Rutgers University fellowship from 1945 until White's death in 1954.

"I could hardly believe that I was working with Elizabeth White in the Pine Barrens," Vail said.

According to the Whitesbog Historic Trust Internet site, White was born in 1871 in New Lisbon.

She began working at the family's cranberry plantation at Whitesbog at the age of 22.

The oldest of four daughters, White never married, but worked with

ry here at Whitesbog. Whitesbog has so many stories to tell," Teresa Earley, executive director of the trust said.

The blueberry was designated New Jersey's official state fruit in 2004, according to Earley.

Prior to the cultivation of the blueberry at Whitesbog, the blueberry grew in the wild and was not a marketable crop.

White and Dr. Frederick V. Coville developed the first cultivated crop of marketable blueberries in 1916.

"Coville knew how to propagate blueberry plants from cuttings," research geneticist for the US Department of Agriculture and trust president Dr. Mark Ehlenfeldt said.

White, according to the trust, brought the raw materials of wild blueberries, acidic soil, and the financing to experiment on a large scale.



PHOTOS COURTESY WHITESBOG HISTORIC TRUST

Elizabeth White works in a field on the Whitesbog plantation.

workers received better housing and accommodations at Whitesbog than at other New Jersey bogs," the trust site states.

According to Vail, the Friendship House was created by White to care for

everybody. Without White, they wouldn't have been able to earn a decent living," Vail said.

White employed the locals to go out into the wild within 20 miles of the plantation and gather blue-

"People would come from all over the world to see her collection of Pine Barren plants," Vail said.

Vail distinctly remembers a man from Yugoslavia that was fascinated by White's Sundew

key horticulturalists in the nation specializing in hollies.

White suffered a stroke six months after Vail arrived, and Vail began to personally care for White.

"Every morning, before I

The oldest of four daughters, White never married, but worked with

acidic soil, and the financing to experiment on a large scale.



An early portrait of Elizabeth White.

her father J. J. White at the plantation and pursued several endeavors throughout the Pine Barrens region, according to the trust.

She is best known for developing the cultivation of blueberries at the plantation, which is now a historic site off Route 530 in Browns Mills.

The site will host the 22nd annual Blueberry Festival this Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The festival celebrates the rich cultural heritage of this turn-of-the-century company town where the cultivated American blueberry was born, according to the trust.

"There is so much histo-

Whitesbog employed hundreds of workers to help harvest the crop of cranberries each year.

Many of the workers lived on the plantation in two satellite villages known as Florence and Rome.

Those villages were recognized as model company towns for their use of childcare and healthcare services that White spearheaded.

"In 1914, the New Jersey Child Labor Committee singled out Elizabeth White for her concern for the health of the pickers whom she provided with nursing care. The report documents that migrant

dations at Whitesbog than at other New Jersey bogs," the trust site states.

According to Vail, the Friendship House was created by White to care for the worker's children.

"Prior to that the workers would bring their children with them while they were picking at the bogs. She (White) realized that the children shouldn't be out on the bogs," Vail said.

Vail also said White was very concerned for the well being of the workers, and kept the utility room in her home stocked with medical supplies and herbal remedies.

"A nurse would come by once a month to examine the workers and their children to make sure they were healthy," Vail said.

Her work in childcare and healthcare for the workers led President Herbert Hoover to appoint White to the national Commission for Housing.

She helped organize the New Jersey Blueberry Cooperative Association in 1927, became the first woman member of the American Cranberry Association, and also the first woman to receive the New Jersey Department of Agriculture's citation, according to the trust.

White's work was not confined to the plantation.

According to the trust, White had a great love for the people of the Pine Barrens and even considered herself "a piney".

"Sometimes in the evenings White would have me drive her to visit the local people. She knew

berry shrubs for her research, according to Vail.

White employed the locals to go out into the wild within 20 miles of the plantation and gather blue-

"She (Elizabeth White) was a woman far ahead of her time,"

## June Vail Assistant to Elizabeth White

able to earn a decent living," Vail said.

White employed the locals to go out into the wild within 20 miles of the plantation and gather blue-

berry shrubs for her research, according to Vail.

White employed the locals to go out into the wild within 20 miles of the plantation and gather blue-

White suffered a stroke six months after Vail arrived, and Vail began to personally care for White.

plants that were five times the size of the ones in his country.

According to Vail, the man used the Sundew in his native country as a tea to help ease his stomach condition.

According to the trust, she became one of four

White suffered a stroke six months after Vail arrived, and Vail began to personally care for White.

"Every morning, before I would go out into the field, we had to move every joint in the left side of her body," Vail said.

White died at the age of 83 in 1954, and that death left Vail distraught.

"I was holding her hand when she passed on. She was like a grandmother to me," Vail said.

Vail said that White loved life and taught her a great deal during the time they were together.

"She had a knowledge that was amazing," Vail said.



Elizabeth White prepares to photograph the natural landscape in her family's plantation, Whitesbog.