

Whitesbog to celebrate a fruitful tradition

Blueberries were first domesticated in the Bulco village. Its 19th annual festival will be held Saturday.

By Thom Guarnieri
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — It calls itself “the birthplace of the blueberry.”

Whitesbog Village, where the blueberry was domesticated nearly a century ago, will celebrate its roots Saturday at its 19th annual blueberry festival.

Volunteers are finishing work on the general store at the center of the village, while the state Department of Environmental Protection is cutting the grass and putting up signs. Nearly 150 volunteers will staff the events.

“We’re the only one who really has a right to a blueberry festival,” Janet Robbins, a longtime volunteer, said with a slight smile.

The festival will feature a variety of activities, including performances by musicians Glen and Holly Waldeck, the “unofficial troubadours for Mother Nature”; tours; face painting; and a blueberry-pie-eating contest.

Pick-your-own blueberries will not be available this year, said Sue Goldstein, events coordinator, because a frost arrived when Whitesbog’s shrubs had just flowered, destroying much of the crop.

It was here in 1911 that Elizabeth White, daughter of J.J. White, the owner of Whitesbog, began working to cultivate blueberries. They grew wild, but had never been cultivated in gardens. She had heard of Frederick V. Coville, who was researching blueberries, and persuaded her father to support his work.

In 1916, Elizabeth White and Colville produced the first blueberry for sale. She had hired local to search a 20-mile radius around Whitesbog and bring back the best blueberry shrubs they could find.

Whitesbog, which once grew blueberries on 90 acres, was primarily a cranberry farm. In 1912, it was the largest in the

state, and during harvest in September, the village was filled with hundreds of seasonal laborers. Many were Italians from South Philadelphia, who picked and processed blueberries. There were also Portuguese, African American, and Puerto Rican workers.

In a video of the history of Whitesbog, many of these work-

ers recall a childhood of hard work and a sense of belonging, something Robbins can understand.

“I drove in here 12 years ago and fell in love with it,” she said.

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If You Go

■ Whitesbog Village’s blueberry festival will run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday in Browns Mills, a section of Pemberton Township in Burlington County. To get there, drive east on Route 38, which becomes Route 530 when it crosses Route 206. The village is at milepost 13. Parking is \$5 a carload. For more information, call 609-893-4646 or visit www.whitesbog.org.

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Nearly 5,000 people showed up for last year’s festival, Goldstein said.

Visitors will see more than two dozen village buildings that date to the 19th century. Eight have been restored and are leased to people whose rent pays for further restoration. Robbins estimated that the leases generated \$50,000.

The village also hopes to extend the restoration to the fallow blueberry fields, and is looking for someone to put some of them back into operation.

New Jersey: Second in Blueberries

In 2001, the Garden State produced 37 million pounds of blueberries on 7,400 acres. Atlantic and Burlington Counties were the state leaders.

State ranking	Value in millions
1 Michigan	\$51.3
2 New Jersey	\$36.7
3 North Carolina	\$18.9
4 Oregon	\$15.8
5 Georgia	\$13.6
U.S. total	\$165.2

SOURCE: N.J. Department of Agriculture

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