

Trip to Whitesbog triggers nostalgia

Two weeks ago, my 8-year-old son and I went to Whitesbog for a Pinelands celebration sponsored by the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

It was a beautiful early fall day, with just a nip in the air. We had a great time browsing the exhibit tables, buying honey sticks and listening to folk songs and tales about the Jersey Devil.

We took a hayride through the cranberry bogs and learned not only about the PPA's mission as a watchdog organization, but about the cultivation of cranberries and blueberries in New Jersey.

It wasn't our first time in Whitesbog.

I go there often for birding, especially in the winter when the tundra swans come "south" to cruise the cranberry bogs and reservoirs.

And a couple of years ago, I took my older son there for a Halloween campfire, complete with toasting marshmallows, haunted hay rides, and spooky stories about — what else? — the Jersey Devil.

On that particular Halloween night, the singers and storytellers were accompanied by the sound of guns as the reservists at nearby

Fort Dix practiced night maneuvers.

Surprisingly, there were no sounds coming either from Fort Dix or McGuire Air Force Base this time around.

Surprising because, when we got back to the car to go home and turned on the radio, we heard the first announcement of the beginning of the air bombardment of Afghanistan.

That morning in Whitesbog was almost idyllic. We were able for a few hours to forget about the horrors of the previous few weeks.

We could listen to our guide's description of the PPA's methods and debate with him the causes of suburban sprawl. We could pretend for a few hours that the "ordinary" was important again.

How nice, I thought, it would be to return to a simpler time, a time not just before Sept. 11, but also a time when Whitesbog was the center of cranberry and blueberry production and not just a historical curiosity.

But was it a simpler time? When Elizabeth White produced the first commercially viable crop of cultivated blueberries in 1916, life expectancy was 35.5 years, and not

only because of the thousands of young men being killed in what was then called the Great War.

It was a war that saw for the first time the use of biological agents against humans. It was a war that saw for the first time an impersonal soldier dropping bombs on an unseen enemy from high in the sky.

It was a time when anthrax occurred naturally and wasn't manufactured in a lab. It was common among those who worked with sheep, as herders and as weavers and spinners of wool. And there were no antibiotics to fight the bacterium.

It was a time when what we now consider minor ailments could be a death sentence. More people died in the flu epidemic of 1917 (20 million worldwide, including 500,000 in the United States) than in the war that preceded it (8.5 million worldwide, including 126,000 from the United States).

There's still no cure for the flu, but there are antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections and vaccines to prevent it.

There were no vaccines for measles, mumps, rubella, polio, typhus. And the children who survived those diseases were as likely to be found in factories as in

schools.

The first child labor law passed by Congress in 1916 was ruled by the Supreme Court to be an unconstitutional violation of personal freedom.

The census of 1870, just as the Industrial Revolution was steaming up, reported approximately 750,000 child laborers under the age of 15, not including agriculture or family businesses. That same year, the year before Elizabeth White was born, the Department of Education issued its first report to Congress.

There were 7 million children enrolled in elementary schools, but only 80,000 in secondary schools. Seven million may sound like a lot, but the percentage of children aged 5-19 enrolled in schools in the late 19th century was approximately 50 per cent. Today, it's closer to 99 per cent.

Although it's nice to fantasize that there was a better time, no time in history was "simple." Certainly, no time was "idyllic."

On the whole, I prefer a time with antibiotics, child labor laws and near-universal literacy.

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