

Feeling blue: Farm group comes to an end

Competition, development force berry cooperative to call it quits

By Jason Bodnar
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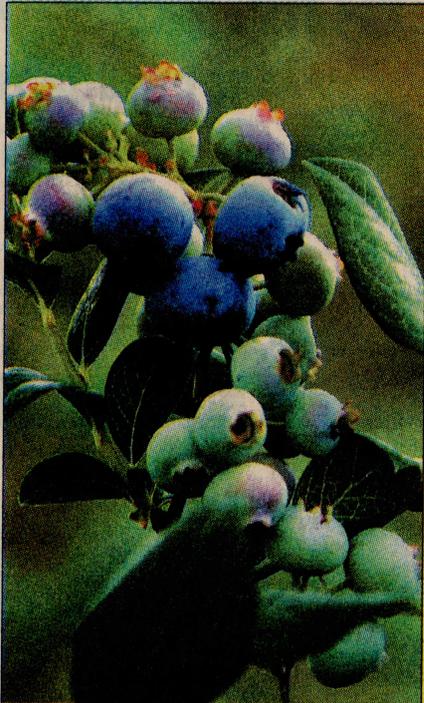
PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — The storm clouds gather overhead, a few shades darker than most of the blueberries on Fred Detrick's farm on Odd Fellows Road. Detrick walks among those berries, reminiscing about the sunny days of the 1960s and 1970s, when hundreds of farmers had fields of blueberries in Burlington County.

"A guy could get two to three acres then," Detrick says. "We called it blue gold. You'd make \$1,000 an acre."

The gold rush has long since ended, but the final symbol of the local decline of blueberry farming came last month, when the Tru-Blu Blueberry Cooperative Association Inc. disbanded.

The Pemberton Township-based co-op, formed in 1927, helped farmers acquire supplies and market and sell blueberries. Tru-Blu once had as many as 360 members, but by the end, it was down to 26, with only a handful growing most of the berries.

Detrick, who was president and acting manager of Tru-Blu, said the



Blueberries grow on a bush at Fred Detrick's Pemberton Township farm.

trademark was sold for \$51,000 to Pemberton Township cranberry grower Joe Darlington, who once harvested blueberries. The Pemberton Township School District bought the Tru-Blu building at the corner of

Four Mile and New Lisbon roads for \$300,000 and plans to convert it to a warehouse.

But the end of Tru-Blu doesn't mean the sky has grown completely dark for blueberry farmers here.

"The closing of that co-op sounds ominous," said Peter Furey, executive director of the New Jersey Farm Bureau. "It sounds like the end, but in reality, it's a reflection of change."

Blueberries are still farmed here by people like Tim and Tom Haines, who have 50 acres of blueberries and 12 acres of cranberries in Pemberton Township. The Haines Berry Farm does less wholesale and more retail and pick-your-own business.

Still, the county where the first blueberry was cultivated in 1916 is no longer awash in its riches.

One reason is competition. Large crops of blueberries are now harvested in Michigan, North Carolina and California.

"Blueberries are doing good, but there are a lot of people planting blueberries. It's supply and demand," said former Tru-Blu member Dennis Doyle, general manager of Atlantic Blueberry Co. in Hammon-

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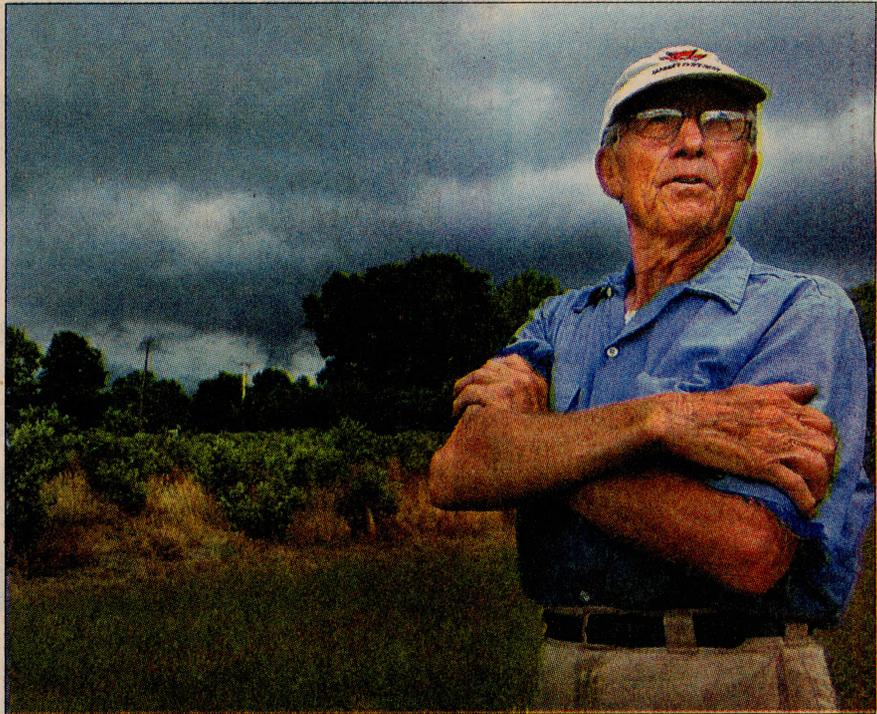
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BCT staff photos/MATT STANLEY

Fred Detrick stands near blueberry bushes on his farm last week.

biggest blueberry-growing state in the country according to the state Farmland Bureau.

In 2003, farmers made \$45.69 million from the crop, according to the bureau.

However, much of that New Jersey berry money now comes from Hammonton, a town which advertises itself as "The Blueberry Capital of the World" and has several blueber-

ry farms spanning hundreds of acres each. County blueberry farmers said it's tough to compete with those bigger farms, which can produce and sell at a cheaper price.

"We're like the mom-and-pop stores, and they're like the Kmart," Tom Haines said.

The decline of blueberry farming

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is also due to the decisions of farmers. Some sold their land to developers, while many ripped up their blueberry fields 20 years ago and planted cranberries, since the red berry was more profitable at the time.

Others, like Detrick, keep growing fields of blue. With

Tru-Blu gone, Detrick now sells many of his berries to farm markets and other distributors.

He also sells some the old-fashioned way, by having people come to his farm, pick their own berries and pay according to the handwritten sign leaning up against a pick-up truck: 90 cents per pound, \$3.60 to fill a 4-pound can.

Detrick, a retired teacher, puts food on his table through his pension, Social Security checks and investments. But like the handful of blueberry farmers still left in Burlington County, he still earns enough to make a profit.

"It's my hobby. I support my hobby," Detrick says, as he waits out the storm in a nearby barn.