

LOCAL HISTORY

*Whitesbog cultivated amicable ethnic relations among the berries.*

# Farm produces a lesson in history

By Jan Hefler

INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Whitesbog is known as the place where the blueberry was first cultivated, when Elizabeth White began cross-breeding wild blueberries to produce plump, juicy fruit for market. The early-20th-century event made agricultural history and put the 3,000-acre cranberry and blueberry farm in the Pine Barrens on the map.

Less known is the rich role Whitesbog played in the history of labor and ethnic relations in America.

"Whitesbog was a culturally diverse place when that wasn't the norm. There were people of different cultures working and living together," said Theresa Earley, administrator of the state-owned Whitesbog Preservation Trust in Pemberton.

From 1900 to 1925, as many as 600 Italian immigrants who had settled in South Philadelphia would move en masse to Whitesbog for two months each fall to harvest cranberries in the bogs, according to Bill Bolger, a Whitesbog historian and author who is doing further research under a federal grant program. Nineteen structures, including a few of the workers' wood-framed cottages, have been preserved at Whitesbog, which is on the National Register of Historic Places and open to the public.

But Bolger's work takes us beyond the discolored wood and rusting nails. Five years ago he located and interviewed 20 of the people who had lived and worked at Whitesbog. They include Americans of Italian, African, Puerto Rican and Portuguese descent.

In "The Voices of Whitesbog," a 10-minute videotape Bolger created with a committee of

### Information

■ Whitesbog Preservation Trust, 120-13 Whitesbog Rd., Browns Mills.

Phone: 609-893-4646

On the Web: [www.whitesbog.org](http://www.whitesbog.org).

Hours: Open every weekend Feb. 5-Dec. 18, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Video: "The Voices of Whitesbog" can be viewed or borrowed at the Burlington County Library in Westampton or the Pinelands Branch Library in Browns Mills.

preservationists, the workers talked about how they hand-picked blueberries and cranberries from enormous fields of bushes together and how they lived in one of three villages on the farm — Whitesbog, Florence and Rome.

Whitesbog was the village for year-round employees who maintained the farm, while Rome and Florence initially were built for the seasonal workers.

"What was intriguing was, in the early 1900s, you had this movable town of Philadelphians, almost exclusively Italian, coming out to the Pine Barrens for two months every year to live and work in the bogs. They moved with their families and their food and brought musicians and storytellers with them," said Bolger, who is also a historian with the National Historical Landmark Program. A "padrone boss," he said, organized the seasonal employees and arranged their transportation and work.

Later, many of the Italian immigrants moved to South Jer-

sey, settling in Hammonton and neighboring communities.

"Our fingers would get all, all, sore and our cuticles would bleed from all the picking," Philomena DiNardo said on the videotape. She had picked berries in the '20s and remembered taking a train, a ferry boat, and a horse and wagon to reach Whitesbog each fall.

DiNardo also said the cottages had no electricity or running water and that the workers shared one outhouse.

By the '30s and into the '60s, after the cranberry and blueberry operation had peaked, a group of about 60 or more African Americans began working at the farm and living year-round in the village of Rome. The Italian Americans lived only in Florence at that time. But despite the segregation, Earl Humphries, an African American who worked with his father driving a blueberry truck between the fields and the packing house, recalled in the videotape how the children from both villages played together. The villages were within walking distance and the workers often congregated at the General Store to buy food and talk.

Puerto Rican and Portuguese workers were also hired at various times to work at Whitesbog.

Bolger said Whitesbog also became a melting pot in which the Italian immigrants and the local Pineys, whose ancestors were British and German, worked together in the fields in the early 1900s.

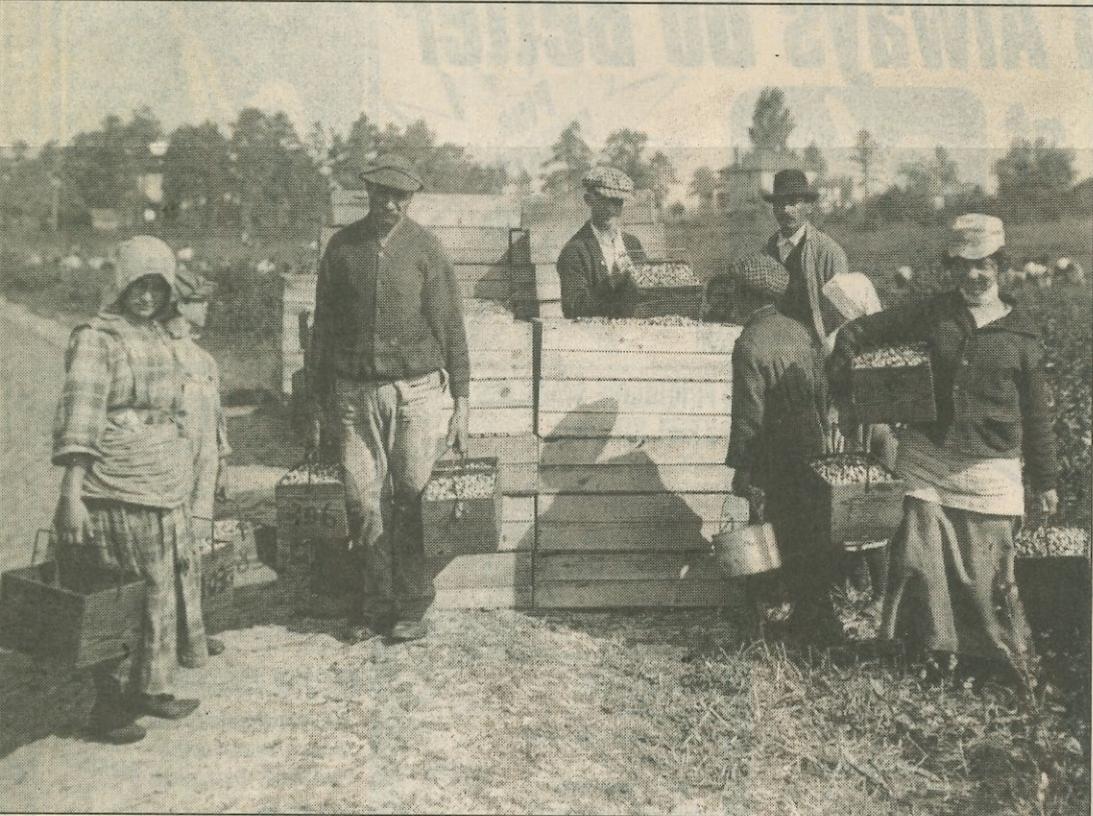
"It is a story of the cultures not clashing but meeting. ... The Italians loved coming to the Pine Barrens because it brought them out of the city. ... The Pineys, who lived there, discovered Italian cooking and that influence is apparent in

their food. There also were some marriages between the cultures," Bolger said.

The videotape can be viewed at the Whitesbog General Store, which is open to the public on weekends (between February and December).

"The video is a great way to get the word out that Whitesbog is a gem in the middle of Burlington County. There is a lot of rich history here," Earley said.

Contact Suburban Staff Writer Jan Hefler at 856-779-3224 or [jhefler@phillynews.com](mailto:jhefler@phillynews.com).



Whitesbog pickers, circa late 1930s, wait for wagons to load cranberries. Italian immigrants who settled in South Philadelphia would move to Whitesbog for two months each fall to harvest cranberries.