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Retired grower heading back to Whitesbog for fall tour

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Special to the BCT

For visitors, a Whitesbog walking tour is like going back to another era, when land meant security and family prestige, consistent crops meant consistent profit, and prosperity meant responsibility to those who helped you prosper.

For Tom Darlington, though, a Whitesbog walking tour is like going back home.

On Sunday, the recently retired cranberry/blueberry grower will conduct a ¾-mile tour of Whitesbog Village, an agricultural enclave recalling Whitesbog's one-time status as New Jersey's largest cran-

IF YOU GO

Whitesbog History Walking Tour

Where: Whitesbog Village, Whitesbog Road, off Route 530 at Mile Marker 13, in Pemberton Township

When: Sunday, 3 p.m. Meet at Whitesbog General Store, first building as you enter the village. Dress appropriately for an two-hour outdoor tour, and wear flat, comfortable shoes.

Admission: \$4 per person or \$9 per family.

Information: Call 893-4646

berry-growing operation and birthplace of the cultivated blueberry.

He'll discuss nearby abandoned sites erased by nature, like Hanover Furnace, and abandoned sites erased by bulldozer, like the villages of Rome and Florence, built by Darlington's great-grandfather to house 500-600 Italian seasonal farm laborers from South Philadelphia.

And, with pride, sentiment and humor, he'll point to still-standing sites like the "Darlington House" or general manager's house, where he once lived, and the "sort of fancy" dwelling of his Aunt Elizabeth ... that is, Elizabeth White who, together with U.S. Department of Agriculture botanist Frederick Coville, developed the plump, sweet blueberry we now pack into our pies and muffins, stir into our fruit salads, and sprinkle liberally on our cereal.

"I'm a fourth-generation cranberry grower," Darlington said. "In 1857, Samuel Jones, who owned and operated Hanover Furnace on what's now Fort Dix, sold his cousin and my great-grandfather, James Fenwick, 300 acres of boggy, mined-out land where wild cranberries were growing.

"By the late 1800s, Fenwick's son-in-law, J.J. White, had increased the holding to 3,000 acres, including 500-600 acres of top-producing cranberry bogs," the Pemberton Township resident con-



Photo/LARRY SAVICH

The Whitesbog walking tour includes a visit to the museum with host Tom Darlington.

tinued.

At turn of century, White's most famous descendant, his unmarried daughter Elizabeth, began experimenting with improving the wild blueberries that were flourishing on the high ground between cranberry bogs.

"Over the years, Pinelands residents had been knocking blueberries off their bushes and selling them for pies," Darlington said, "but the berries weren't very big or sweet, so Aunt Elizabeth contacted Frederick Coville, a botanist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and, together, they developed today's cultivated blueberry.

"The first ones hit the market in 1916, and took off like a rocket," he added.

In the meantime, though, J.J. White died, and management of Whitesbog, with its bogs, fields and collection of turn-of-the-century agricultural, commercial and residential buildings, passed on to the husband of one of Elizabeth's sis-

ters, Darlington's uncle Franklin Chambers.

"My grandfather didn't approve of a woman running the business, even though Aunt Elizabeth was very capable," Darlington recalled. "Naturally, she didn't get along very well with my Uncle Franklin, and when the day came along that I took over operation of Whitesbog, she didn't always get along with me, either."

Darlington, whose mother was another one of Elizabeth White's sisters, never planned to take over Whitesbog.

That assignment was to have fallen to an older brother, while Darlington himself earned a degree in mechanical engineering from Pennsylvania's Swarthmore College, and went to work for Westinghouse Corp., in Chester, Pa.

"Unfortunately, though, my brother was killed in an accident in

See TOUR 7

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OUR From 6

948, and the family expected me to take his place," Darlington said. So, in 1950, my wife and I reluctantly became cranberry and blueberry growers."

Elizabeth White died in 1953, at age 81.

Fourteen years later, when New Jersey's Green Acres program was acquiring cranberry bogs to obtain water for parkland lakes and recreation areas, Darlington reluctantly sold Whitesbog to the state.

"However, I did keep one undeveloped tract of land south of Route 530," he said, "and on it I developed 50 acres of new cranberry bogs,

with some blueberries growing as well.

In addition," he said, "I have a year-to-year lease on another 150 acres of cranberry bogs in old Whitesbog, but blueberries don't grow there anymore."

Today, Whitesbog Village is a state site administered as part of Lebanon State Forest, which surrounds it on three sides.

Whitesbog Preservation Trust, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the village, attracts visitors to the settlement with a year-round calendar of events, like Tom Darlington's history tour.

"At this point, my bogs are man-

aged by my older son, Joseph," Darlington said, "but I continue to feel very close to Whitesbog and what happened there, and I enjoy sharing its history with others."

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