

Searching for roots

Saving history in Whitesbog

By DONNA McARDLE
Special to The Times

PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP
Over the years, the Whitesbog Preservation Trust has meticulously restored, building by building, the village of Whitesbog, long a cranberry farm and the birthplace of the cultivated American blueberry.

The riches of Whitesbog, where immigrant workers from Philadelphia traveled seasonally

to pick berries for the J.J. White Cranberry and Blueberry Co., and where Elizabeth C. White, in the early 1900s, realized the nutritional treasure of blueberries, is once again a thriving historic spot, where visitors can see firsthand the workings of the Pine-lands bogs and blueberry fields.

The work has been done in conjunction with the state Division of Parks and Forestry with the

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Staff photo by Frank Jacobs III

Scrubbing clothes the old-fashioned way at Whitesbog village are, from left: Billy Taylor, 9; Robert Mitchell, 10; and Katie Quinn, 9. The cranberry farm has been meticulously restored.

Village

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help of numerous state and private foundation grants.

Now the group has begun an even more ambitious project. Besides restoring the buildings, they are trying to capture the memories and oral histories of the many Italian immigrants who lived in the village. They are hoping to preserve actual firsthand accounts before the elderly population passes on and the richness of their memories is lost forever.

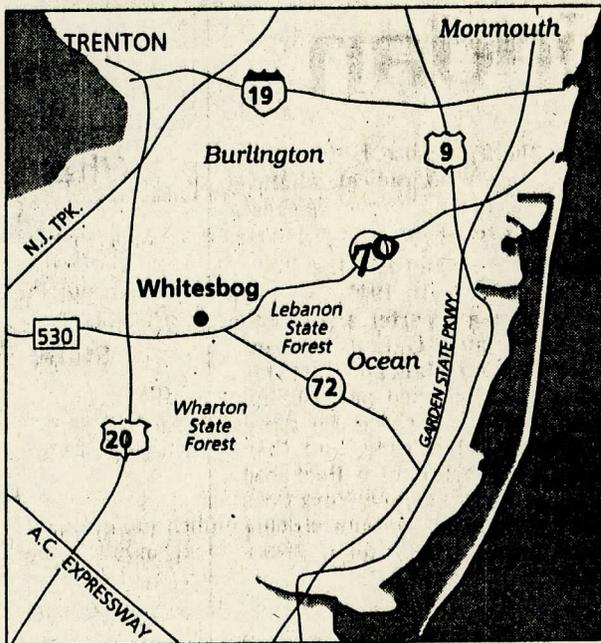
According to Whitesbog spokeswoman Janet Robbins, working with a \$5,000 New Jersey Council for the Humanities grant, the preservation trust is putting together a video documentary titled "Whitesbog: An American Company Town." The documentary will be filmed by professional director-producer Mitchell Smith, who has worked on other projects on the Pine Barrens.

THE KEY, however, is to find the original residents who lived in the village between the 1920s and 1950s.

"I have begun tracking down names," said Robbins, "and have sent out about 40 invitations so far. We are anxious to locate as many people as possible who lived in the village, but many of them have scattered throughout the country."

The invitations ask the residents to "come home" this Saturday for a reunion luncheon. The visitors will spend the morning and afternoon reminiscing, while Mitchell and a Preservation Trust member film the conversations. That footage will then be included in the final film, which will probably also include still photos from the many scrapbooks collected over the years, footage of the village and clips from old 8 mm films that also have surfaced.

Robbins may have found her big-



Times graphic by Laura Sommerville

Invitations ask residents to "come home" Saturday for a reunion luncheon at Whitesbog.

gest challenge yet in helping to restore the old village. While many of the buildings have been rebuilt — including the general store, eight original family dwellings that are now rented out, the schoolhouse and just recently a worker's cottage that has also been transformed into an interpretive museum — replacing wood is turning out to be easier than finding the people who made the village a vibrant community.

"There were hundreds of people who lived here during that time," she said. "Many of them were Italian immigrants from Philadelphia, which is why the two worker-villages are called Florence and Rome. The first bogs were dug around the time of the Civil War for planting cranberries, and the seasonal workers came for the harvest. After the blueberries started around 1915, the village started housing year-round workers. I have tried locating many people, but phone numbers are disconnected or changed and it has been difficult."

Robbins said that Trust member William Bolger, who is a local historian and author of a book about

Smithville, is chairing the committee overseeing the video production, to ensure historical accuracy. She said the Trust hopes to hold a showing of the video in September, unless it could be complete by July. "We're having a celebration then to mark the opening of the worker's cottage, and it would be great to preview the documentary," she said.

ROBBINS said the group members were thankful. In addition to them receiving state funding, a North Jersey group, the 1772 Foundation, generously donated to the refurbishment of the cottage, which was originally built as a quad, for four families, then converted to a duplex and eventually in the '60s turned into a single-family dwelling.

"We have preserved it half as a quad and half as a duplex," she said, "to give the flavor of the times."

Robbins asks any former village residents who lived at Whitesbog between the 1920s and the 1950s to call the Trust if they can attend the June 3 luncheon, or if they have any memorabilia to share. The phone number is 609-893-4646.