

ELIZABETH C. WHITE (1871-1954)

A Biographical Sketch

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ELIZABETH C. WHITE

Elizabeth Coleman White, born 1871, was the oldest of the four daughters of Joseph J. And Mary A. (Fenwick) White of New Lisbon, NJ. At the age of 22 Elizabeth began working on her family's cranberry plantation at Whitesbog in the heart of the New Jersey Pinebarrens. Unlike her sisters, Elizabeth never married but spent the balance of her 83 years involved in many pursuits at Whitesbog and throughout the Pines region. One of these endeavors, the first successful attempt to cultivate blueberries, earned her a national reputation as a horticulturist and significantly modified the economy of the New Jersey Pinebarrens and other similar areas throughout the country.

Her first job at the bogs in 1893 was handing out tickets to the harvest crew in return for the boxes of cranberries that they picked by hand during the fall months. During the next 18 years, Elizabeth exhibited interest in finding ways to continue the improvement of the business at Whitesbog which was rapidly expanding into the largest cranberry operation in the state. During the first decade of the twentieth century, she collaborated with Dr. John B. Smith, a government entomologist, who studied and eliminated a type of katydid that was ruining the crops. Then, in 1911, Elizabeth read the U.S.D.A. publication entitled *Experiments in Blueberry Culture*, researched and written by Dr. Frederick V. Coville (Coville 1910). Realizing the potential value of the work, Elizabeth contacted Coville to offer him support in his work (Hambidge 1927).

The blueberry, or *Vaccinium corymbosum* (the high bush variety) and *Vaccinium Pennsylvanicum*, (the low bush variety), grows throughout the Pinelands in the same general environment that nurtures its cousin, the cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpus*). Like the cranberry, the blueberry thrives on the acid soil of this region. Blueberries ripen earlier than do cranberries. Their harvesting in July thus complements the cranberry harvest of the fall. Local residents traditionally set aside time in July to go to the "huckleberry" woods to have picnics and pick the fruit. (The term "huckleberry" as used in New Jersey referred both to the New England huckleberry of genus *Gaylussacia* as well as to the blueberry.) Many tried to cultivate the plants in their gardens but without success. In a taped interview in 1953, Elizabeth recalled her own experiences in this endeavor:

[Father and I] had talked about the possibility of adding blueberries to our cranberry crop but we were not the fruit people to know that we had to have a uniform product. We knew the wild bushes were very, very different. We used to go around sampling these fruits and one would be too sour and one would be too flat, one would be too skinny and finally, we would come to one that father would call "peachy," but we didn't know how to propagate the plant. At that time, it was said among the farmers of New Jersey that blueberries could not be cultivated. (White 1953: personal communication)

In 1916, only five years after Elizabeth White's alliance with Dr. Coville, they had managed to cultivate and produce a blueberry crop for sale. Contributing to the effort were three parties: Coville, who offered the scientific knowledge and technique necessary to propagate and hybridize fruit; J.J. White, Inc., and particularly Elizabeth C. White, who offered financing and the Whitesbog infrastructure necessary to carry out experiments on a large scale; and, finally, the

"Pineys" themselves. It was the contribution of the latter which is perhaps the most interesting. The Pineys were enlisted by Miss White to employ their woodsmen's skills as hunter-gatherers to search the Pines within a 20-mile radius of Whitesbog and locate the choicest blueberry shrubs. Elizabeth recalled the ability of these men in distinguishing the endless varieties of blueberry:

... As I was hunting wild blueberry bushes I learned that the old blueberry pickers that were going to the different swamps recognized a difference in the class of bushes in each swamp. For instance, in Iricks Swamp I was told that the majority of the berries were pear shaped and I was told that in Feather Bed Swamp the majority of the berries were very blue and flattened. (White 1953: personal communication).

Elizabeth devised a plan to tap this knowledge in order to locate the best possible plants in the area, in effect, to locate the one bush out of 10,000 having exceptionally fine characteristics for propagation. Pickers going into the woods for the wild berries were organized under either Jake Sooy or Alfred Stevenson and equipped with labels, bottles containing the preservative formalin, and an aluminum gauge with a 5/8-inch diameter hole. Only bushes having berries 5/8 inch or larger were sought. The effort was rewarded at \$2.00 per bush plus the time required for relocating each plant and bringing it back (Hambidge 1927). In addition, the finders enjoyed the distinction of having the bushes which they found named after them. Thus it was that the last generation of the highly skilled woodsmen-gatherers gave their names to the first cultivated blueberries, as Miss White recalls:

In getting the early bushes I tried to name every bush after the finder And so I had the Adams bush found by Jim Adams, the Harding bush that was found by Ralph Harding, and the Dunphy bush that was found by Theodore Dunphy. When Sam Lemon found a bush I could not name it the Lemon bush so I called it the Sam. Finally, Rube Leek of Chatsworth found a bush. I did not know it was anything special at that time and I used the full name in my notes.... Coville called it the Rube which I thought was a poor name for an aristocratic bush. He finally suggested that we call it the Rubel. And the Rubel bush has really been the keystone of blueberry breeding. It is the one bush of which there are hundreds of acres planted just by divisions. It's still in cultivation [1953] and I still consider it a good bush. It also enters into the inheritance in two or three directions of all the accepted varieties of the present day. (White 1953: personal communication)

Acquiring the bushes was only the first step. The following account of their propagation was published in *Success* magazine in 1927:

Next we cut up the bushes into pieces, sometimes as many as a hundred pieces to a bush. These were planted under glass in carefully prepared propagating beds. But for a long time we had very poor luck with propagation; only about ten per cent of the plants lived.... Finally we narrowed down to six varieties which seemed in every way suitable for commercial production, Rubel, Harding, Sam, Grover, Adams and Dunphy. (Hambidge 1927)

The first successful field plantings were made in 1912 at the present site of Elizabeth White's

house, Suningive. The first plantings in which varieties were set in alternate rows for the purpose of cross-pollination were made just east of her home (Hambidge 1927).

The result of the blueberry research for Whitesbog was the production of a new crop, as well as the entirely new business of propagating and selling blueberry bushes. As plants were sold across the country, New Jersey bushes became established in many states.

The plants or varieties that were selected here are grown now extensively in North Carolina and Michigan. To a great extent in Washington, Oregon, British Columbia and New England. To a lesser extent in a considerable number of other states, such as New York and Connecticut. (White 1953: personal communication)

The plants cultivated for production at Whitesbog yielded considerable profits even before the bushes were fully mature. In 1927 the 60-acre crop was estimated at 64,000 quarts, or 2,000 crates. Thus, figuring \$10.00 a crate, the crop was worth \$20,000 (Hambidge 1927). At its production peak, Whitesbog had 90 acres of blueberries under cultivation.

Elizabeth's interests in cultivation did not end with blueberries. Starting her own corporation apart from J.J. White, Inc., she began nurseries for cultivating the local holly tree. She was eventually recognized as one of four key horticulturists in the nation specializing in hollies. Other plants from areas similar to the Pinebarrens were also of interest. The Franklinia, a rare type of magnolia shrub found only in one part of Georgia and originally discovered by John Bartram, the eighteenth-century Philadelphia botanist, was introduced to Miss White by Coville. She propagated the Franklinia and sold it through her nursery.

In 1923 at Whitesbog, Elizabeth constructed her house, Suningive, next to Fenwick's Old Bog, the oldest cranberry bog on the farm that had been developed by her grandfather in the 1850's. Surrounding the house was a special garden of various native plants, which Elizabeth designed to be "in harmony with its surroundings" (White 1941A: 11). This garden seemed to symbolize Elizabeth's interests in the distinct and rich natural flora of the Pines as well as in using the environment harmoniously.

In addition to her interests in cultivation, Elizabeth, like her father, was involved in the marketing of Whitesbog's products. In 1927 she helped organize the New Jersey Blueberry Cooperative Association. She was also the first woman member of the American Cranberry Association and became its first woman to receive the New Jersey Department of Agriculture's citation (White 1953: personal communication).

Miss White was also acquainted with Elizabeth Kite and the sociological research she had conducted in the Pinebarrens. This work was widely publicized and misrepresented as describing all the Pines people, leading to the popularly held belief in urban areas that all Pines residents were backward, genetically in-bred and defective. Elizabeth White supported the Kite research and became involved in raising money to build the work-training school at Four Mile near New Lisbon. As for the popular degradation of the Pines people, Elizabeth declared in 1914, "I am a *pine* myself." (Elizabeth White 1914: 2).