

Penn. 17wp. man recalls Whitesbog's history with weekend lecture

By Lysbeth Bledsoe
Special to the BCT

Perhaps there are some things you don't know about Historic Whitesbog Village in Pemberton Township and the famous fruit that flourished there.

For example, why are Whitesbog and cranberries connected in the first place, and if the berries burgeoned there in the early 20th century, why aren't they just as successful there in the late 20th century?

Tom Darlington, a Pemberton Township resident who operates 150 acres of cranberry bogs on a 400-acre tract known as Buffin's Meadows south of Route 70, knows all the answers and will relate them to the audience at his slide lecture, titled "The History and Lore of Whitesbog: Personal Reminiscences," Sunday at the Burlington County Historical Society's Corson Poley Center in Burlington City.

Darlington is well-equipped to discuss the history of Whitesbog. He is a fourth-generation descendant of the man who founded the cranberry-growing enterprise and, for 17 years, the manager of Whitesbog.

"Back in 1857, Col. James Fenwick bought 300 acres that had been part of Hanover Furnace, a center for making bog iron," Darlington said. "The land was mined-out ore property that included 60 acres of wild cranberries, which Fenwick turned into a pick-your-own business.

"Fenwick's son-in-law, J.J. White, expanded the property, which became known as Whitesbog, to 3,000 acres, of which 600 acres were in cranberry bogs, which permitted water-harvesting," Darlington said. "From his time, cranberry growing there flourished."

Upon White's death in 1924, each of his four daughters received a quarter-share in Whitesbog, but only one of them, his oldest daughter, Elizabeth, chose to spend her life on the site.

Darlington is the son of White's third daughter, Beulah.

"While Aunt Elizabeth was great with plants and people, she didn't have much of a business sense," Darlington said. "Besides, in that day, women didn't manage businesses like Whitesbog, which was New Jersey's largest cranberry grower, so — much to Aunt Elizabeth's chagrin — management of Whitesbog fell to Franklin Chambers, a violin-playing University of Pennsylvania mathematics professor and the husband of Elizabeth's youngest sister, Anne."

With Chambers performing

IF YOU GO

A slide lecture on Whitesbog

When: Sunday, 4 p.m.

Where: Burlington County Historical Society's Corson Poley Center, 454 Lawrence St., Burlington City.

Admission: Free.

More information: Call (609) 386-4773.

"fairly decently, if unwillingly," as Darlington put it, Whitesbog continued successful.

In the early 1900s, however, Elizabeth's interest in the blueberries that grew wild between the bogs led to her 1911 alliance with Frederick Coville, a U.S. Department of Agriculture botanist. Between them, they converted the small, tart, wild blueberries into today's big, succulent, sweet, domestic blueberries.

"Under J.J. White, Whitesbog had 600 acres in cranberries, but in Aunt Elizabeth's time, 150 of those acres were switched to blueberries," Darlington said. "Today, Whitesbog is more famous for blueberries than it is for cranberries, even though blueberries aren't grown commercially there anymore."

After Franklin Chambers' death in 1940, Whitesbog was managed by Darlington's older brother, Joseph, until his death in 1948. Then, for two years, management fell to White's daughter, Mary.

"In 1950, I was building aviation gas turbines for Westinghouse in Lester, Pa.," Darlington said, "and I really had no plans to give up my work and manage cranberry bogs.

"But," he continued, "I was finally persuaded to change my mind, so I made the move reluctantly, running Whitesbog until 1967 when the state was looking for land suitable for conservation and recreation, which included cranberry bogs."

As reluctant as Darlington was to take the helm at Whitesbog, he was even more reluctant to sell the site to the state.

He said, however, that since the state had the ability to acquire Whitesbog by condemnation, he ultimately elected to sell, retaining for himself J.J. White's noncultivated land at Buffin's Meadows, where he later developed his own cranberry bogs.

"Also," he said, "the state let me lease 150 acres of the original Whitesbog, where cranberries can be harvested. Those bogs were rebuilt and now they're managed by a fifth-generation descent of Col. James Fenwick, my son Joseph.

"So," Darlington said, "the family continues, and Whitesbog continues, too."