



BCT staff photos/DENNIS MCDONALD

This is a photo taken in the 1920s of workers picking cranberries at the Village of Whitesbog.

Videotape to chronicle Whitesbog of the past

By Sally Friedman
Special to the BCT

PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — If you lived or worked at Whitesbog Village or know someone who did, the Whitesbog Village Preservation Trust is looking for you.

A history project that began about 20 years ago will culminate Saturday at the general store in historic Whitesbog Village when videographers assemble data for a documentary chronicling a significant time and place in Burlington County history. The Whitesbog Village Preservation Trust is sponsoring the video project as a way of preserving the unique history of the village, which is located in a remote area off Route 530.

The trust is looking for people who worked or lived at Whitesbog and for descendants of people who worked at the village during its early days, said Janet Robbins, vice president of the trust's board of trustees.

Whitesbog became a center for the growing and harvesting of cranberries and blueberries, initially under the stewardship of Col. James A. Fenwick, who began harvesting cranberries there in the 1860s, and later through the ground-breaking efforts of J.J. White and his daughter, Elizabeth C. White. It was Elizabeth C. White who shepherded and revolutionized the development of the blueberry industry at Whitesbog.

The village was a true company town, housing 41 workers and their families year-round, according to Robbins and chief project researcher William Bolger, who is chairman of the video project. The village's population swelled with seasonal workers during harvesting months, which ran from June through September. The seasonal workers lived in areas then known as Florence and Rome; they came largely from the large Italian population in South Philadelphia, Robbins said, and the areas were named after cities in Italy.

"Twenty years ago, we began compiling lists of workers and their descendants," Robbins said, "but the project has been



Janet Robbins, vice president of the Whitesbog Village Preservation Trust, and Frederick Gibbs, president of the organization, walk past a row of restored workers' houses at the Whitesbog Village off Route 530 in Pemberton Township.

IF YOU GO

Whitesbog Preservation Trust documentary taping

The Whitesbog Preservation Trust documentary taping will be held Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Lunch will be served. The event is free and open to anyone with association or memories of Whitesbog from the 1920s through the 1950s. For more information, call (609) 893-4646.

stalled. Now we're ready to go, and we've gotten a small grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities to create a documentary called "Whitesbog: An American Company Town."

On Saturday, anyone with personal reminiscences about Whitesbog Village from the 1920s to the 1950s is invited to a luncheon and filming session to be held at the village's original general store. Potential participants for the taping will be asked for their personal memories about village life, from the annual Christmas programs to the games children played.

"We're interested in capturing that period

of Whitesbog's history and presenting a portrait of the large numbers of Italian immigrants who were so much a part of the village," Robbins said. "We're hoping that some will even remember Elizabeth White and have stories to tell us."

Already, Robbins has heard from John, David and Michael Preisat, the three sons of the general store's owner who are planning to attend the Saturday taping.

"One son is coming all the way from California, so we're just delighted by the interest," said Robbins, who is expecting about 70 people for the project.

While Whitesbog is owned today by the state as part of the Lebanon State Forest tract, the Whitesbog Village Preservation Trust, in cooperation with the state Division of Parks and Forestry, is hoping to support the restoration of the village as an educational and historic site. Whitesbog is listed on the registers for state and national historic sites.

A special Whitesbog Folklife and Oral History Committee has been formed within the trust to help oversee the collection of pictures, memorabilia and memories of early residents.