

Family continues cranbury farm tradition

by **Darlene Bakhoun**
Community News staff

BROWNS MILLS — The Darlington Family continues a five-generation, 130-year tradition of cranberry culture at Whitesbog.

"The true history of Whitesbog started with my great-grandfather James Fenwick," said Thomas Darlington, 81, former president and CEO of the J.J. White Company.

In the late 1850's, Fenwick purchased 300 acres of land from his entrepreneur cousin, Benjamin Jones who owned the Kinkora Rail and Hanover Furnace, according to Darlington.

The land had been cleared of trees and the wetlands dredged in search of iron, and it was commonly thought that after the land was used for iron production it held no value.

"It was thought that the land was useless, but Grandfather Fenwick knew better," Darlington said.

A few years earlier, in 1854, Fenwick had experimented with a small cranberry bog called "Skunk's Misery" on the Coleman's farm, a mile east of Pemberton.

Skunk's Misery yielded promising results, and it

J.J. White had developed bogs on his land at Rake Pond, south of New Lisbon.

Darlington recalls reading entries from his grandfather's journal "They were quite interesting. At Rake Pond he had a cabin that he shared with his horse. The horse slept on one side of the room, and he slept on the other."

After Fenwick's death, J.J. and Mary, Darlington's grandparents inherited his farm, and J.J. White became the sole executive of the Fenwick's cranberry operation.

"He (J.J. White) enlarged the property ten to one, to approximately 3,000 acres of watershed land and 600 acres of cranberries," Darlington said.

Darlington said his grandparents, the Whites, had four daughters, of which only one was interested in the working on the family plantation.

"My aunt Elizabeth noticed that wild blueberries grew on the raised banks of the cranberry bogs and became interested in developing a new crop," Darlington said.

Elizabeth White read an article in 1911 about the work of Dr. Frederick V. Coville, titled "Experiments in Blueberry Culture", and convinced her father to support his re-



DARLENE BAKHOUM

These worker homes used to hum with activity during the cultivation season at Whitesbog in Browns Mills.

Coville ended in disagreement, according to Darlington.

"They didn't always get along, but they needed each other. They worked well as a team. After they

from home, Darlington said his aunt never forgot about him.

"She and I would pick a pint of teaberries every fall, and when I was away

"They offered me a proposition to come back to Whitesbog as president and design machinery for the cranberry and blueberry industry. If I said no,

ton, in 1967, the state began approaching cranberry landowners to sell their wetlands for recreation and preservation purposes.

"When the asked me I said (of their plan), 'That's

berry bog called "Skunk's Misery" on the Coleman's farm, a mile east of Pemberton.

Skunk's Misery yielded promising results, and it was at that time that Fenwick realized the potential market for the cranberry.

Fenwick's cultivation of the cranberry at the site, which would later become known as Whitesbog, was successful and marked the beginning of the cranberry boom.

In 1869, Fenwick's daughter Mary married J.J. White, a successful businessman, inventor, and farmer who also had an interest in cranberries.

article in 1911 about the work of Dr. Frederick V. Coville, titled "Experiments in Blueberry Culture", and convinced her father to support his research.

Darlington said Elizabeth White and Coville both had the same vision "Elizabeth wanted to cultivate the blueberry, but she did not have the technology to do so. Dr. Coville had the technology, but lacked the raw materials."

The partnership between Elizabeth White and Coville lasted 20 years, and produced the first marketable blueberry.

His aunt's alliance with

Coville ended in disagreement, according to Darlington.

"They didn't always get along, but they needed each other. They worked well as a team. After they split, they stopped being productive. Neither of them went on to do anything substantial alone, but they did great work together," Darlington said.

Elizabeth never married and was like a mother to him, Darlington said.

"At bedtime, she would take me to bed and sing me to sleep. I have fond memories of my Aunt Elizabeth," Darlington said.

Even when he had grown up and was away

from home, Darlington said his aunt never forgot about him.

"She and I would pick a pint of teaberries every fall, and when I was away

"They offered me a proposition to come back to Whitesbog as president and design machinery for the cranberry and blueberry industry. If I said no, they told me they were going to have to sell the company,"

Thomas Darlington

Former CEO of the J.J. White Company

in the military, she would send me some during harvest time. We weren't allowed to have any outside food, so I had to hide the berries in my laundry bag. I wasn't going to give them up for anything," Darlington said.

Darlington said though he loved Aunt Elizabeth dearly for her steamed cranberry pudding, he did not initially share her interest in the family business.

"When my older brother Joe died in a plane crash, I was told 'you have to come over here and run Whitesbog,'" Darlington said.

According to Darlington, at the time he was very happy designing aviation gas turbine parts for Westinghouse, and wanted nothing to do with the harvest of cranberries.

In 1950, two years after his brother's crash on the Whitesbog airstrip, the family approached him again about the business, Darlington said.

proposition to come back to Whitesbog as president and design machinery for the cranberry and blueberry industry. If I said no,

they told me they were going to have to sell the company," Darlington said.

Like his grandfather, J.J. White, Darlington's background was in machine design and it was his inventor's spirit that led him back to Whitesbog.

According to the Whitesbog trust, Darlington's most important invention was the dry harvest cranberry picker, which decreased labor from 150 pickers to a crew of 15 machines.

"After Bill Haines introduced the Wet Harvester a few years later, I adapted the walk behind machine to a wider riding harvester," Darlington said.

Advancements in production technology led to an extreme decrease in the amount of labor needed to harvest cranberries "The J.J. White Company went from using 600 hand pickers to 150 scoopers to 15 dry harvesters to one hydraulic harvester today," Darlington said.

According to Darlington

approaching cranberry landowners to sell their wetlands for recreation and preservation purposes.

"When they asked me I said (of their plan), 'That's nice, but I don't want to sell,'" Darlington said.

Darlington said the state began condemning cranberry farms to acquire the wetlands at cheaper prices.

"I didn't want that to happen to us, so I offered the sale of Whitesbog to the state, with the exception of 150 acres," Darlington said.

Darlington and his sons built new bogs on the 150 acres, known as Buffins Meadows.

Darlington said the state never used Whitesbog for recreation, so J.J. White Inc. leased an additional 150 acres of the original bogs from the state.

Under his son's leadership, the new and leased bogs are doing well, compared with the yields of the bogs at the early 1900's, however, the advancements in cranberry harvesting has led to the rapid decline in barrel prices, according to Darlington.

Darlington said his son Joe and his wife Brenda are not going to give up on cranberries.

"They are incorporating ag-tourism into the business. They are offering guided bus tours of the bogs during harvest. This past fall was a trial run, and next season they hope to be in full swing," Darlington said.



DARLENE BAKHOUM

One of the outbuildings sits on the shore of the bog in the Whitesbog property in Browns Mills.