

## All things 'Piney' feted at blueberry fest in New Jersey

**I**N NEW JERSEY, where open land is disappearing faster than water ice on a summer day, the Pine Barrens stand out as the largest national reserve east of the Mississippi River, stretching roughly from Lakehurst to Cape May County.



**P.J. THOMAS**

The people who live here are content with a slower pace amid lakes, bogs and forests

far removed from the hustle of Philadelphia — even though the city is less than an hour away.

All things "Piney," as folks native to the area used to call themselves, will be celebrated June 26 during the 27th annual Whitesbog Blueberry Festival at the Historic Whitesbog Village in Browns Mills, N.J., about 40 miles from Philadelphia.

"Admission to the festival is only \$8 per carload, and people really take advantage of that," said Susan Burpee Phillips, executive director of the Whitesbog Preservation Trust, the organization that oversees the preservation of Whitesbog and various activities there. The festival is the organization's major fund-raiser.

"There will be 40 handmade crafters, an art exhibit including Pinelands artists, bluegrass music, blueberry baked goods . . . blueberry picking, old-fashioned wagons and history tours, lectures and demonstrations through the grounds [and] 21 buildings in the village," Phillips said.

### New life in a barren land

In the late 1800s, this area of New Jersey was considered virtually worthless, having been heavily strip-mined for ore used in iron production. But the acidic soil and water of the abandoned mining areas turned out to be perfect for growing cranberries.

In 1857, James A. Fenwick began buying land in the area that would later be known as the Pine Barrens and farming the sour red fruit. His Whitesbog Farm, eventually grew to about



Historic Whitesbog Village in Browns Mills hosts the festival.

3,000 acres — the largest cranberry farm in New Jersey.

Soon Whitesbog Village sprung up, a company town with a general store and outbuildings to serve the 600 or so people who worked in the labor-intensive cranberry harvest. Many of them traveled from Philadelphia by wagon or train for the seasonal work.

In the early 1900s, Fenwick's granddaughter, Elizabeth White, began working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to cultivate and propagate the wild blueberries that grew abundantly in the area. White also put locals' knowledge to use gathering various native plants to create the highbush blueberry we know today. This new crop allowed the Whitesbog Farm to extend its season to nine months, and the village flourished.

Over the years, technological farming advances reduced the migrant work force and, by the 1960s, the village was almost vacant. That's when the federal government purchased Whitesbog to protect the vast freshwater aquifer that lies under much of the Pine Barrens.

A fifth generation of the White family is still farming in the area, though, and leases some Whitesbog acreage, Phillips said.

### Proudly 'Piney'

"At one time, the local people who lived here had a very unique way of speaking," said Sharon

Goodman, who grew up in Mount Holly, and whose parents grew up in Whitesbog Village in the 1930s. She proudly described her family as Pineys. "They lived rather isolated and lived off of the land — collecting, using and selling the plants that were native to the area."

The festival, a celebration of the Pine Barrens' unique history and culture, has grown more popular as more people discover it. This year, up to 8,000 visitors are expected.

There will be an exhibit of vintage cars and information booths from organizations and destinations eager to provide suggestions for other summer entertainment.

And, of course, what would a Pine Barrens festival be without that shirt-staining favorite, the blueberry pie-eating contest?

Visitors can park in a nearby lot and walk to the village or board a handicapped-accessible bus for the two-minute ride there.

Before touring the grounds, stop at the restored General Store, still the village's hub and a good place to get oriented while purchasing old-fashioned candy, merchandise or a festival T-shirt.

Be sure to tour Elizabeth White's home, Suningive, for an interesting glimpse into the life of a woman who had a big impact on the region's agriculture.

In her day, White gained international recognition for her culti-

vation of the blueberry. She helped organize the New Jersey Blueberry Cooperative Association and was the first woman member of the American Cranberry Association, according to the Whitesbog Web site. She moved to Whitesbog Village in 1923 and remained there until her death in 1954.

Nature enthusiasts will especially love hiking to the cranberry bogs through trails of forest, perhaps glimpsing some of the 70 species of birds that have been identified here, plus other wildlife and the native rare plants of this distinctive landscape.

While other organizations plead for help to implement their programs, the Whitesbog Preservation Trust has a passionate band of more than 200 volunteers. They give year-round tours of the village, as well as the colorful fall cranberry harvest. A monthly moonlight hike is held year-round on the Satur-

day night before the full moon.

If all you know of the Pine Barrens is that it's somewhere between Philadelphia and the Jersey Shore, load up the car June 26 for a quick and easy country drive to the festival.

Supporting land preservation is such a feel-good cause. And when was the last time you were able to enjoy a family outing for less than the cost of a movie ticket? ★

The 27th annual Whitesbog Blueberry Festival will be held 10 a.m.-4 p.m. June 26, rain or shine, at Whitesbog Village in Browns Mills, N.J. From the Ben Franklin Bridge, take either Route 70 East to 530, or Route 38 East, crossing over 206 onto Route 530, to mile-marker 13. Information, 609-893-4646 or [www.whitesbog.org](http://www.whitesbog.org).

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