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Preserving stories as well as buildings.

Whitesbog group tries hand at video

By Donna McArdle
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PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — Over the years, the Whitesbog Preservation Trust has meticulously restored, building by building, the village of Whitesbog, long a cranberry farm and the birthplace of the cultivated American blueberry.

The riches of Whitesbog, where immigrant workers from Philadelphia traveled seasonally to pick berries for the J.J. White Cranberry & Blueberry Co., and where Elizabeth C. White in the early 1900s realized the nutritional treasure of blueberries, is again a thriving historic spot; visitors can see firsthand the workings of the Pinelands bogs and blueberry fields.

The work has been done in conjunction with the state Division of Parks and Forestry with the help of numerous state and private grants.

Now the preservation group has begun an even more ambitious project: It is trying to capture the memories and oral histories of the many Italian immigrants who lived in the village, hoping to preserve their firsthand accounts before the older ones pass on and their memories are lost.

Whitesbog spokeswoman Janet Robbins said the trust was putting together a video documentary, *Whitesbog: An American Company Town*. Financed by a \$5,000 state grant, it will be taped by Mitchell Smith, a professional director and producer who has worked on other projects about the Pine Barrens.

The key is to find people who lived in the village between the 1920s and 1950s. "I have begun tracking down names," Robbins said, "and have sent out about 40 invitations so far. We are anxious to locate as many people as possible who lived in the village, but many of them have scattered throughout the country."

The invitations asked the residents to "come home" on Saturday

for a reunion luncheon. The visitors were to spend the day reminiscing, while Mitchell and a Whitesbog Preservation Trust member taped the conversations. That footage will be included in the documentary, which probably will also include photos from many scrapbooks, footage of the village, and clips from old 8mm films.

Robbins may have found her biggest challenge yet in helping to restore the old village. While many of the buildings have been rebuilt — including the general store, eight original family dwellings that are now rented, the schoolhouse, and just recently a worker's cottage that has also been transformed into an interpretive museum — replacing wood is turning out to be easier than finding the people who made the village a vibrant community.

"There were hundreds of people who lived here during that time," she said. "Many of them were Italian immigrants from Philadelphia, which is why the two worker-villages are called Florence and Rome. The first bogs were dug around the time of the Civil War for planting cranberries, and the seasonal workers came for the harvest. After the blueberries started around 1915, the village started housing year-round workers. I have tried locating many people, but phone numbers are disconnected or changed, and it has been difficult."

Robbins said William Bolger, a trust member and local historian, is chairing the committee to oversee the video production and ensure historical accuracy. She said the trust hoped to show the video in September, unless it could be complete by July.

"We're having a celebration then to mark the opening of the worker's cottage," she said, "and it would be great to preview the documentary."

The Whitesbog Preservation Trust can be reached at 609-893-4646.