



Elizabeth Coleman White  
Courtesy Alice Paul Institute

# The Blueberry: Born & Bred in New Jersey

The Story of Elizabeth Coleman White and  
the Domestication of the Wild Blueberry.

by Ginny Knackmuhs

“We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Lizzie,”<sup>1</sup> asserts Dennis Doyle, manager of the Atlantic Blueberry Company, referring to the multi-million dollar blueberry industry’s debt to Elizabeth Coleman White, who produced the first marketable crop of blueberries in 1916. Born in New Lisbon in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey in 1871, Elizabeth, the feisty eldest daughter of cranberry grower Joseph J. White, dreamed of cultivating “a field full of bushes”<sup>2</sup> of the sweet wild berries she found in the woods.

Prior to 1916, the wild blueberry proved elusive to domestication, though many tried. Today, thanks to the pioneering work of Miss White, teamed with botanist Frederick A. Coville, blueberries are grown around the world from Canada, and the U.S., to the Pacific Rim countries of China and New Zealand and South America’s Argentina and Chile. New Jersey blueberry farms today cover 8,000 acres over seven counties of Central and Southern Jersey. In 1931 Garden State production accounted for 99% of the crop, and despite phenomenal

growth in cultivation, the small state of New Jersey still produces a sizeable portion of the crop, ranking second behind leading U.S. producer, Michigan. Other notable high producing states include North Carolina, Maine, Washington and Oregon. Blueberries, not only sweet and delicious, are also healthy, enjoying the spotlight for its high amounts of fiber, vitamin C and antioxidants. The State of New Jersey proclaimed the blueberry the official state fruit in 2004.<sup>3</sup>

## EARLY DAYS

The story began in 1893 when 22-year-old Elizabeth Coleman White began working on her family’s cranberry plantation, called White’s bog. As a young girl, she would accompany her father into the bogs and listen as he explained how cranberry vines grew, the only one of his daughters who took an interest. Her first real job on the farm was as “bushel man,” handing the pickers a ticket, redeemable for cash and supplies, as they turned in their one peck boxes of cranberries.<sup>4</sup>

The farm was originally purchased in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century by her Quaker grandfather, James A. Fenwick, who realized the potential of turning old iron strip-mined bogs into profitable cranberry producers. Her father, Joseph Josiah White, continued the successful business, writing a definitive report, “Cranberry Culture,” which became the standard of the industry in 1870, and organizing the American Cranberry Growers Association.<sup>5</sup>

Miss Lizzie, as she was called, loved the wild blueberry bushes that grew throughout the pinelands between the cranberry bogs and wondered if they could be domesticated and then harvested in June and July, providing a complementary and valuable use of the land without interfering with the fall harvest of the cranberries. She came across a Department of Agriculture publication “Experiments in Blueberry Culture” by botanist Dr. Frederick A. Coville, and contacted him, offering the Whitesbog farm as a resource for his experimentation. Coville had begun his studies in New Hampshire and was ready to commit to arrangements on Cape Cod, when Miss White’s letter arrived. He was swayed by her letter, since hers was the only one—of all the correspondence he received—that offered something rather than just asking for advice or support. A partnership began.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Coville supplied the scientific skill, visiting Whitesbog periodically, but working primarily in a Washington D.C. lab. Miss White had the practical knowledge and was able to recruit the pineland woodsmen as allies in the search for the best blueberries, which natives called swamp huckleberries. Varieties abounded in both high and low bush varieties, referring to the height of the bush. Taste ranged from sweet to bitter; shape from flat to pear shaped, and hues from blue to

deep purple. Texture, aroma and number of days to ripening also varied. Miss Lizzie challenged the locals, paying them for each bush identified that had berries at least 5/8 inch wide. Woodsmen, armed with a gauge for measuring along with labels and bottles for collecting, scoured the woods and were paid \$1 to \$3 dollars per sample. After the season was over, they would guide Miss Lizzie back to the bush and dig it up.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to monetary compensation, she named each bush after its discoverer. So the bush that Theodore Dunphy found became the “Dunphy bush”; the one from Ralph Harding was christened the “Harding bush.” She couldn’t very well name Sam Lemon’s find the “Lemon bush,” so it became the “Sam bush.” Rube Leek’s bush—which eventually became the “keystone of blueberry breeding,”—was neither the “Rube bush” nor the “Leek bush,” but the “Rubel bush,” a combination name she thought fitting for such an “aristocratic bush.”<sup>8</sup> The project began slowly with three bushes identified in 1911, 20 in 1912, only 1 in 1913 due to an early frost, but a remarkable 60 bushes the following year. Eventually 100 bushes were identified over the five year period.<sup>9</sup>

The bushes were then cut into five inch lengths and propagated into hundreds of other plants. The keys to successful growth, after identifying the best plants, turned out to be acid soil, moist temperatures, cross pollination, and loamy, aerated soil for the shallow roots. The first crop went to market under the label of the Tru-Blu Berry Company in 1916, with the principal customer the Hudson River Day Liner.<sup>10</sup>

In a speech to the New Jersey Horticultural Society in December 1916, Miss White described in detail the process involved in





Berry-picker, Rose Biondo, in a photograph by photographer and social reformer, Lewis Hine.

blueberry culture. She also defended the pine people from “stories greatly exaggerating their bad points the past year or two,” stereotyped as uneducated, slow witted and inbred hillbillies. “Here I would like to pay a tribute to the pine people who have assisted me to locate these plants.”<sup>11</sup>

#### CHILD LABOR CONTROVERSY

Not all of Miss White’s time, however, was spent on the blueberry identification project. In 1910 controversy erupted when an agent of the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) issued a scathing report of child labor in the cranberry industry and an article appeared later in November 1913 in *Good Housekeeping* magazine, “Who Picked Your Cranberries?” Since about a third of the cranberry crop was harvested at J.J. White, Inc., Elizabeth took up the cause, writing letters and speaking out against what she viewed as the unfair and erroneous reporting by the NCLC. Her hands-on experience with the worker families provided her

with a different perspective and she was vocal and insistent in her defense of her father’s company and the industry.<sup>12</sup>

Blueberry and cranberry picking was largely done by wives and children of the Italian immigrants from South Philadelphia who had replaced the original pineland pickers and who swelled the ranks of the year round workers to over 500 during harvest season. Two worker villages in the bogs were named Rome and Florence and Italian families—originally from rural Southern Italy—returned year after year for the good wages earned and escape from the city.<sup>13</sup> Compared to wages earned in the city, berry picking was financially rewarding, especially if the whole family participated. Children under 14 did not work officially, but many families expected their children to help out. This was the crux of the argument with the NCLC investigators—that it was not the growers, but the parents who recruited their children for ten hour shifts in the bogs. While this defense of child labor seems horrifying to us today, the general feeling by the



public at the time was that “there is nothing harmful in outdoor work for children, no matter how young.”<sup>14</sup> Unlike child labor in mills, factories and mines, working on the farm was viewed as one teacher put it, as a “Godsend for little boys and girls to be taken from the unclean and wretched tenements of the slums to breathe the good open air of the country,” even while knowing that “the children in the fields are exploited and compelled to work at all hours.”<sup>15</sup>

When the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was passed, regulating child labor, agriculture was exempted and it was not until 1974 that standards for children working on farms were included, still “well below those that apply elsewhere,” and a “failure of national policy,” in the opinion of historian Hugh Hindman.<sup>16</sup>

Miss White, as superintendent of the bogs, appeared before the NCLC and the New Jersey Conference on Charities and Corrections and wrote letters to Jane Addams at Hull House, the advocate for the immigrants and the poor. Elizabeth reported that children played and frolicked in the clear air of the pinelands and “when a child does work he simply works at the request of his parents.”<sup>17</sup> White’s bog did make substantial improvements in living conditions during this period, eventually earning “grudging respect” from the investigators as one of the best and most progressive camps. Miss White conceded that children missed school in September and October because of the harvest, but she believed in informal education and later worked with the Women’s Home Mission to provide babysitting for the younger children and informal educational and recreational programs for the older ones.<sup>18</sup>

By 1915 child labor in cranberry production became a moot point, as widespread use of the cranberry scoop replaced hand picking by women and children. The scoop was a simple device, a shovel with slots which a man would place at the bottom of a vine and then pull through to the top, with the berries landing in the scoop. It required considerable strength, but greatly facilitated the harvest and was used extensively, except in bogs where the vines were more sensitive. Continuing improvements in mechanized harvesting machines further reduced the number of pickers required and decreased the number of Italian families who came. However, since the blueberries were more delicate and ripened at different times on the same bush, some families continued to come for the July blueberry harvest for many years.<sup>19</sup>

### MARKETING GENIUS

With the first commercial crop of seventeen crates delivered in 1916, Elizabeth next tackled the challenge of developing a market. An early flier touted the fruit as “Jewels of the Moorland.”<sup>20</sup> She also reevaluated the original paper packaging, replacing it with cellophane, which enticed customers with a view of the bright plump berries. She had first seen the cellophane wrapped with European chocolates and, although not available in the US, she located the producers in Europe and arranged for the import.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to selling berries directly, in 1917 she began selling the bushes, which fostered growth of the overall market and was hugely successful.

Lizzie’s mother died in 1923, leaving each of

the four daughters an inheritance, which she plowed back into the business. Her father died the following year. Although she had told him she wanted to be president of J.J. White, Inc, on his death, in his will he appointed her youngest sister's husband, Franklin Chambers, as president, an affirmation of the current thinking that women were not meant to be prominent in business. Despite her disappointment, she continued to be active in the company and her nephew, Tom Darlington remembers the sometimes contentious board meetings.<sup>22</sup>

#### LATER CAREER

In 1923 she built her own house and named it Suningive, which was the surname of someone who had written to her. She liked the sound of it.<sup>23</sup> The first floor was used as office space with the upper floors for living. By 1924, business was booming and the Post Office established a branch in Whitesbog. In 1927, she founded the New Jersey Blueberry Cooperative and in 1929 was the first woman president of the Cranberry

Growers Association. In 1932 the state of New Jersey presented her an award for her contribution to agriculture.<sup>24</sup>

She suffered a stroke at age 76, but recovered and at age 80 she was determined to perfect and preserve the American Holly, so she started a new venture, Holly Haven, Inc., for the cultivation of holly. She had corresponded for the previous ten years with Wilfred Wheeler, the Massachusetts Secretary of Agriculture and through joint field trips worked together on their common goal of saving the holly from obscurity.<sup>25</sup> She died of cancer in 1954 at age 83 and her ashes were spread across the bogs and fields she loved.<sup>26</sup>

The next time you top your cereal with a heaping mound of blueberries or savor blueberry muffins or pancakes, remember that a determined young woman from the Pinelands of New Jersey pioneered cultivation of the wild blueberry, transforming the local economy and seeding an industry that would eventually spread around the world.



### VISIT WHITE&BOG

Today the Whitesbog Plantation is a New Jersey Historic Site, preserved in 1966, and run by the Whitesbog Preservation Trust, billed as "Birthplace of the Highbush Blueberry and Historic Center for Cranberry Innovation." Monthly tours of the village include many of the original buildings: the general store, workers' cottages and Elizabeth's home, Suningive. The annual Blueberry Festival in June is a special occasion with Bluegrass and Pinelands music, entertainment, historical tours, crafts, food, blueberry picking and family fun.

### IF YOU GO

Be sure to check out the website first for calendar of events, directions and other useful information at [www.whitesbog.org](http://www.whitesbog.org). The village is located in Burlington County in Central Jersey in the Brendan Byrne (formerly Lebanon) State Forest. Whitesbog is also included in the New Jersey Women's Heritage Trail [www.state.nj.us/dep/hpo/Iidentify/whtrai12.htm](http://www.state.nj.us/dep/hpo/Iidentify/whtrai12.htm), testament to the strength, vision and perseverance of Miss White.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ginny Knackmuhs worked in the pharmaceutical industry before devoting her time to writing. She has been published in the New Jersey section of the *New York Times* and *Running Times*. She has a B.A. in government studies from Cornell University and has always been interested in history and politics. She lives in Wyckoff, New Jersey.