

Millers Bogs —

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Special Writer

Most of Jersey's "lost" pine barrens towns have been "discovered" and their stories duly recorded. A few have been restored to some extent. There are others, however, that have been forgotten by history.

Such a one is Millers Bogs on Albertson Stream between Ancora and Pestletown on a north-south line of reference and between Hammonton and Waterford on an east-west line.

It was one of the cranberry towns that sprang up after 1840 when commercial cranberry growing saw its start in the pine and cedar wilderness we now call "the barrens."

Millers Bogs was once owned by Joseph Wharton who incorporated it into the holdings that would later

become Wharton Forest.

But before Wharton there was John Henry Miller, a huge man of German extraction and an amiable disposition. He came to this spot on Albertson Stream from Hog Wallow, the very seedbed of the Jersey cranberry industry in the Chatsworth area.

Now it is rare indeed when one gets the opportunity to visit a forgotten Pine Barrens town such as Millers Bogs with someone who was born and raised there. But such an opportunity came this writer's way on Dec. 8. Mrs. Ethel Miller Girard, whose father, John Henry Miller, built the town many years ago, agreed to pay a visit to her birthplace.

The visit had been arranged by Louis DeMarco, a Hammonton councilman and Mrs. Girard's nephew. Accompanying us were DeMarco's wife, Belva, and Mrs.

Joseph Petruzzi, Mrs. Girard's daughter with whom she makes her home.

The day was sunny, unseasonably warm for December. We drove through woods that haven't changed at all over the years, following an old road, made almost impassible by recent rains, to the bog town. Ethel Girard, who will be 85 on Dec. 28, explained there were two main routes to the bogs in the old days: Wharton Ave. from the north and Cedar Ave. from the south. This was a short cut.

The town proved to be less than two miles from the Petruzzi's modern home on Pestletown Rd. There is little enough left of the once thriving cranberry settlement today. A scattering of cellar holes and foundations, the clearing, some huge white oaks and gnarled catalpa trees. We walked over to the largest and best preserved of the foundations and history had come alive. Here was Mrs. Ethel Girard standing beside the ruins of the house her father had built nearly a century ago, the house where she had been born, the house in the wilderness that sheltered her in the earlier days.

Miller had chosen the site well. It was on knoll high above the old bog. Albertson Stream flowed silently past.

Mrs. Girard pointed to one corner of the ruin. "I was born in this house," she said simply. "The bedroom was right there."

In a sober afterthought she added, "My brother died in this house too. He had been in Hammonton, came home, ate a big piece of apple pie and died right here."

Ethel Girard was one of 11 children, two of whom died in infancy.

She recalls Joseph Wharton, who eventually came to own the bogs, visiting at this spot. "He liked peppermint candy," she said. "He had a lot with him because he tossed some out to us kids."

A short walk took us down an embankment to what had been a main dike. Here had been a deep, cool gatehole. "People used to come in here and swim on Sunday afternoons," Lou DeMarco said. "Maybe as many as fifty on a hot day."



ONCE A GARDEN — Mrs. Ethel Miller Girard stands on spot where she recalls growing a garden of "most beautiful flowers" in the sandy Pine Barrens soil at Millers Bogs near Pestletown many years ago.

A Forgotten Pine Barrens Town

A little more walking and Mrs. Girard pointed out the remains of another building all but swallowed up by buck brush. This was the bunkhouse where the workers slept. It was two stories high and there were 14 cubicles or cells on each level. There was room for a mattress stuffed with straw in each compartment. It provided privacy, of course, but little else.

Back with Ethel Girard near the old house. With a sweep of her arm she designated a wide area among towering white oaks. "My husband cleared this for a garden. And over there," she added, pointing, "I grew the most beautiful flowers."

She nodded toward a clump of catalpa trees — huge gnarled specimens today. "You wonder how they got there? Every Arbor Day we children planted catalpa trees."

In so doing they were following an old pineland custom. The old-time iron makers, glassblowers and cranberry people almost always replaced the ever encroaching pitch pine with catalpa, ailanthus and black walnut.

The garden of course provided fresh produce in season and the

surplus was canned and stored on shelves in the cellar of the "big house".

After the berries had been harvested by workers using old wooden "scoops" they were sorted and put in barrels. Later they were trundled over woods roads to rail cars waiting at Ancora. The same wagons that transported the berries had met a train earlier as the pickers, most of them of Italian extraction, arrived "from the city"

Ancora was something of center to those who lived in the bog town; they went for their mail and newspapers. The grocery shopping was done in Hammonton. The children went to school in Elm. This was in the days before buses and "We walked through the woods to attend school in Elm," Mrs. Girard said.

A short walk down a lonely sand road brought us to the ruins of what had been a large warehouse. "This was the only painted building in the town," Ethel Girard said. "It was red. Some of us wanted my father to paint our house red too but he wouldn't do it."

Built of cedar it weathered into a beautiful shade of gray just as did the houses and buildings in other Pine Barrens Towns.

Life apparently was not too harsh at the bogs. In fact, Ethel Girard said, "We considered ourselves rich. We bought a car in 1917 for \$700! A Ford."

We are all too prone to think of history as staid and stuffy. But history is, after all, people. And people living in those towns now gone in the wilderness were much like people of any time. They laughed, danced, sang, rejoiced, wept, sorrowed. They married, had their children, buried their dead, gave thanks for their blessings, were numbed by their tragedies.

Looking at gaping cellar holes, overgrown fields now overlooked by trees that were old before these people were born, it is hard to realize that.

It takes a little time with someone like Ethel Girard to understand. A person who was given candy by Joseph Wharton. A person who can point to a crumbling ruin in a pristine wilderness area and say, "There was where I was born."

This article appeared in the Thursday December 23, 1982 issue of the Hammonton News. The writer of this article, J.G. Wilson, worked at the newspaper for two decades as reporter, photographer and editor. He had a great interest in and love for history and his articles are well researched. He died in 1992.

Copy of this article was donated to the Historical Society of Winslow Township by Mrs. Rosemary Mauriello, Granddaughter of John and Mary Miller. Mrs. Mauriello lives in the Waterford Works section of Winslow Township.