

Photographs by I. HERBERT GORDON
JERSEY WILDERNESS—Motoring is not recommended in The Plains except for four-wheel-drive vehicles. One exception is sand road, at the left, off Route 72.

Wild and Windswept Plains That Only the Jersey ‘Pineys’ Know

By I. HERBERT GORDON

WARREN GROVE, N. J.—Southern New Jersey's vast and lonely Pine Barrens, the inland coastal plain that stretches from Asbury Park south to near Cape May, covers almost 1,600,000 acres of leached, sandy soil. Some 80 miles long and 30 miles wide, it is a strange forest country of forbidding beauty.

The Pine Barrens region is dotted with dark and tangled cedar swamps and occasional cranberry bogs, and it is lined with ancient wagon roads that meander through miles of pitch pine to nowhere. It is an area of haunting emptiness.

To many, the most curious section of all within the Pine Barrens is that known as The Plains. Windswept and sun-baked, The Plains are blanketed with pine and oak, and heath-type plants carpet the ground. Yet, the land is reminiscent not of the rich forests of the eastern United States but of the endless sagebrush country of the Far West.

On The Plains, the forest does not reach to the sky; instead, the trees grow strangely short, stunted and twisted, or sprawl oddly across the ground. A man can stand head-high above virgin timber that averages only four feet in height.

Few Towns, Few Highways

The Plains cover some 12,000 acres in a part of the state that has few towns and fewer numbered and maintained highways. The region is best located geographically by noting that it lies about midway between Toms River and Atlantic City. The principal Plains forest, the West Plains, is bisected in its northern section by well-traveled State Route 72, and the entire region is flanked roughly on the east by State Route 539 and on the west by State Routes 532 and 563.

To most motorists whipping through The Plains along State Route 72, the countryside looks much like an old woodland struggling for survival after a searing forest fire. Yet, even a cursory examination will show that these are young, albeit odd, trees.

The oaks here grow multistemmed, like bushes, and the pines shrink almost to the ground, spreading out like mats. Neither botanists nor natives, known locally as "pineys," agree on the cause.

Near the point where Ocean and Burlington Counties meet in this area is a lonely, sun-drenched, two-pump service station. The driveway is packed dirt. The owner is a friendly and garrulous "piney" whose wrinkled face has been tanned to crisp leather by years of sun and wind.

The old man brushed his hands on his white T-shirt. "A man can enjoy himself here," he said. "If you just sit back and look at it, this is real beautiful country. Some say it's sort of lonely. Well, I have eight dogs, and I'd rather have them than eight neighbors."

Empty and Peaceful

He stared across the broad section of The Plains toward the horizon. A single bird circled in the misty afternoon sky. The wind mussed his thinning white hair. The land was empty and peaceful.

We crossed the highway from his service station to look more closely at the "forest."

"I've lived right around here more than 50 years," he said, "and this hasn't grown any since I've been here. It's always the same, short and scrubby."

He grabbed a branch of stunted oak in his gnarled hand.

"See? This wood's so tough you can't hack it with a knife. You know why? It's got no moisture in it. That's why. No water. My well's down 200 feet, and it cost me \$2,000 to drill it. That's how far down the water is."

Scientists have no completely satisfactory explanation for The Plains. Lester S. Thomas, writing for the New Jersey Department of Conservation and Economic Development, says a consensus of theories points to a "combination of factors: fires, infertility, exposure and aridity."

Future in Question

There is a serious question about the future of The Plains country. The New Jersey Division of Parks and Forestry owns only a fractional 700 acres, and the state has no apparent plans to acquire any more of the land in the near future. Much is privately owned, some belongs to local townships, part is a United States Navy reservation known as the Warren Grove Target Area, and part is used by the Army for practice

paratroop jumps, an activity that has closed several roads and barred visitors from some sections.

Despite the aridness of The Plains, isolated bits at the edges are being nibbled away for commercial use. And there is widespread talk among the "pineys" that The Plains soon will be devastated for a major international jetport that would accommodate giant supersonic transports.

Several ancient sand roads twist through The Plains, although there is little evidence that man ever found much use for this land except for hunting and to cross en route to somewhere else. It is too infertile to farm and, to most people, too inhospitable to live on.

The roads are excellent for hikers, but they should remember to carry water. Both a compass and topographical maps also are recommended for the cross-country explorer.

One Good Sand Road

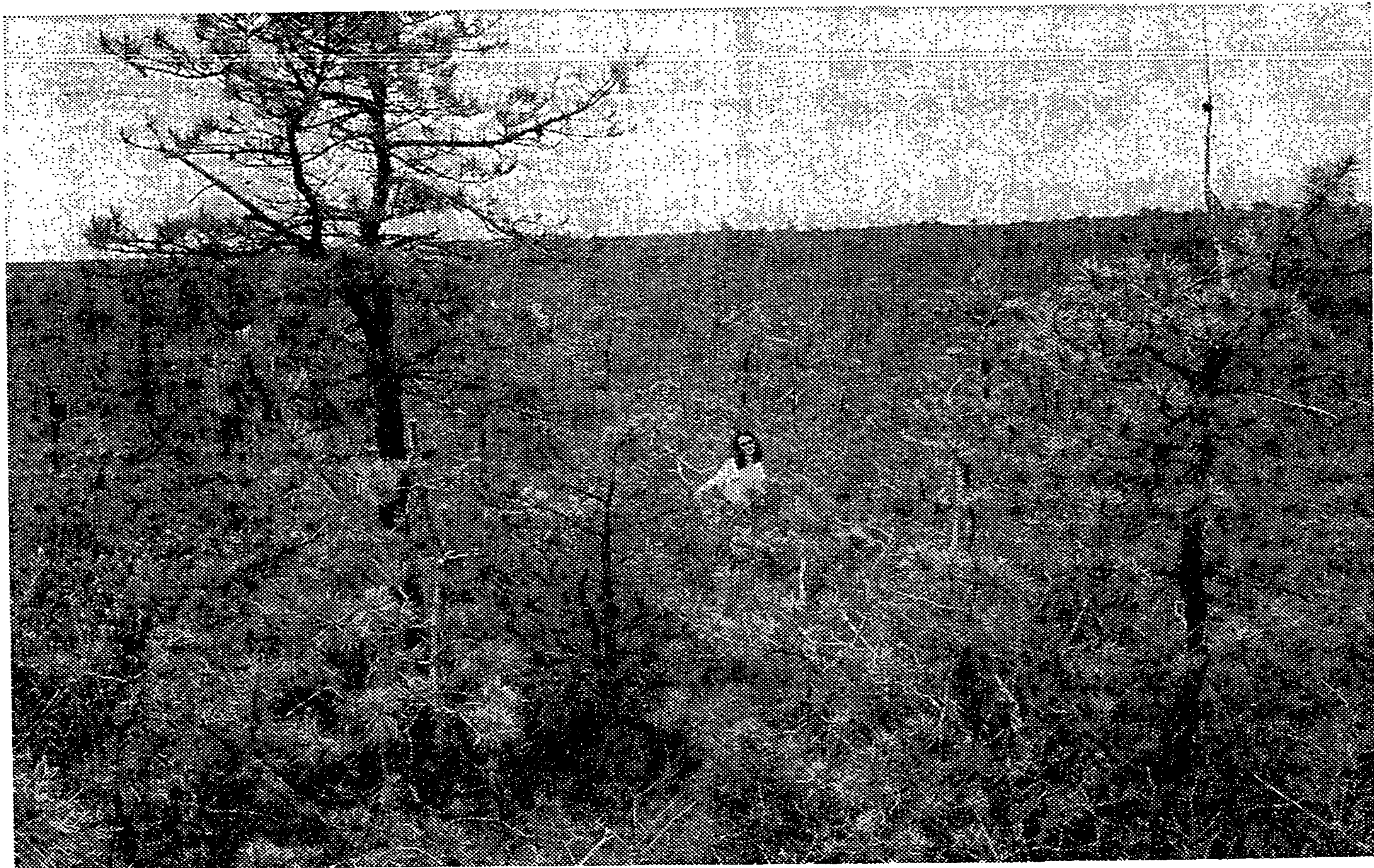
Driving through The Plains is not recommended, except with jeeps or motorcycles. An exception is Jenkins Road, a reasonably well-maintained sand road linking State Route 72 with the village of Jenkins on State Route 563.

The distance to Jenkins is less than 15 miles, but the road is not marked. Be wary, for it is easy to get lost on side roads. Jenkins Road begins opposite Applegate's Service Station on State

Route 72, approximately one and one-half miles west of Route 72's intersection with State Route 539.

Visitors who spend more than a day prowling The Plains will find accommodations limited. Camping sites, cabins and some trailer spaces are available at several nearby state forests, including Bass River, Wharton and Lebacon. All three offer picnicking, swimming, fishing and hunting, as well as drinking water and sanitary facilities.

Motorists can reach State Route 72 via Exit 63 of the Garden State Parkway. From the New Jersey Turnpike, turn east at Exit 4, and then follow State Routes 73 and 70 to State Route 72.



SAGEBRUSH EAST—A visitor stands as tall as the brush in The Plains of the Pine Barrens.