

Down Among the Sheltering Pines

But New Jersey's Pine Barrens need shelter themselves against population pressure, industry, and now casinos. Will "blackjack oak" get a new meaning?

BY DIETRICK E. THOMSEN



Ground water, an important natural resource in the Pines, can also be inviting.

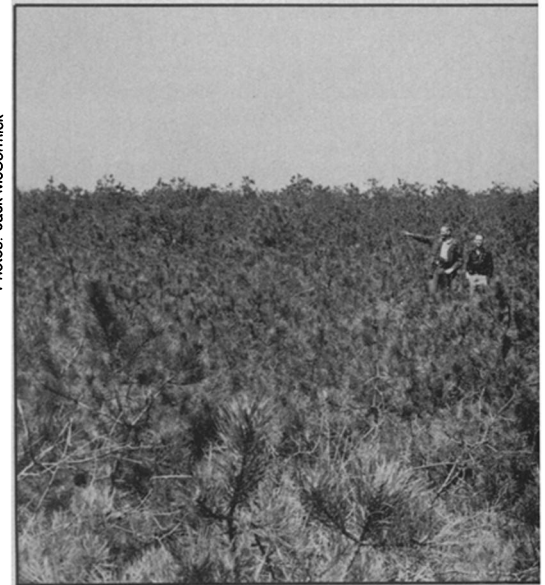
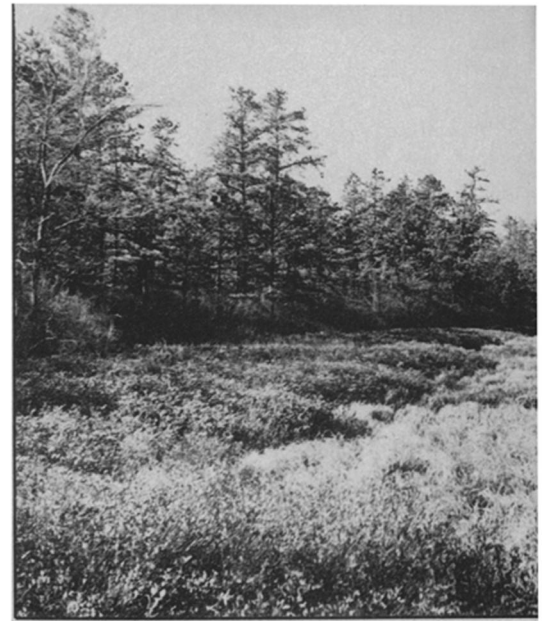
October is the month for picking cranberries. They have to be gotten before the frost gets to them. So you stood up to your ankles in water in the bog along the stream beside the railroad tracks and bent low for the red berries on the bright green plants. The engine steamed slowly back and forth, endlessly switching cars. Across the tracks was a pond named Ducks Nest for the mallard and teal that used to come there rather than the pair of Canada geese that actually nested there. (As Anna Russell would say, I'm not making this up, you know, there really is such a place.) Around the whole thing stood woods.

The scene described above did not lie in the New Jersey Pine Barrens although this article is about that region. The scene was a bit too far north. The woods there were dominated by deciduous trees. But it had, in bits and pieces, the elements that make the Pine Barrens what they are. It had the pines in sufficient numbers to be noticeable. These are no ponderosas, no 300-foot redwoods. These are stunted, scraggly, twisted, look as if they were designed by a Japanese. With them go sandy soil, which is apparent even here, 60 miles north of the Pine Barrens proper, slow boggy streams with a hint of iron in them, and berries. Cranberries in the fall, blueberries in the summer. There is a smell, a summer smell, because the piney woods are near the ocean, of hot sand and huckleberries cooking on the bush, of pine resin and creosoted railroad ties, of the hot sour dankness of a summer bog — oh, forget it.

The Pine Barrens are a tract of southern New Jersey that covers most of its two biggest counties and portions of three or four others. They are the largest undeveloped stretch of land on the eastern seaboard of the United States, but they are not likely to be so for long — unless.

They are called barrens because they are barren of what farmers want. The soil is not suited for the crops farmers would like to plant and is mostly hard to drain. So there has been a 300-year history of avoidance of the area. The Dutch and the Swedes built their settlements north and south of it. The West Jersey Quakers stayed primly along its western edge. The motley crew that settled East Jersey tended to ignore it. The armies of the Revolutionary War went carefully around it. The railroads of the 19th century and the roads of the 20th century that took people to the seashore tended to cross it without stopping much.

So the Pine Barrens are still there. They can be seen on a map on which they are not marked: The symbols for settlement become sparse and small. The highways are perceptibly farther apart. The townships are larger; the county seats farther away. But the impression of emptiness is relative, relative to megalopolis. This is not the solitude of the Sonora desert south of Tucson nor the Wyoming highlands around Sherman summit nor central Nevada, even though in a forested region human presence is less obtrusive than in a desert. The Pine Barrens have always been inhabited. First there were Indians. Then



Photos: Jack McCormick

A stand of high-bush blueberries used to be a find. They are easier to pick than the low-bush kind. In the top photo they are growing in a bog surrounded by pines. In another part of the forest two men, not Brobdingnagians, stand among dwarf trees that grow 2 to 10 feet tall.

gradually came a mixture of people who had reasons, good or bad, for wanting to get away from the settlements. These people bred a population generally called Pineys (not without a touch of contempt on the part of other residents of the state), who speak a dialect all their own and have a reputation for taciturnity and for not wanting much to do with outsiders. If you buy their venison roasts, it is indelicate to mention the time of year. If you buy what they offer in mason jars, it is indelicate to talk at all; just put your money on the stump.

But the reclusive reputation of the Pineys may be somewhat overdone in the folklore. They too have township and county officials who feel joy in their hearts at the prospect of something that will raise tax revenues. The traditional local indus-



Jack McCormick

conservation programs. The state's goes back as much as half a century. It has been buying up tracts of the Pine Barrens and turning them into state parks and forests for a long time. "The state has been doing a very good job," says John Tkach of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Bills pending before Congress would provide the Department of the Interior with \$25 million for Pine Barrens land purchases. It is hard to say exactly what will be done until the bills are passed, Tkach cautions, but the usual procedure elsewhere has been to buy up specially significant areas — the Pygmy Forest, a stand of extremely short-statured trees, is one often mentioned — and try to control development in selected other places by buying easements. "You can't buy up the whole big area of 900,000 acres," Tkach points out. (That's 1,500 square miles or about a fifth of the state.) The state is now planning to spend \$10 million on land purchases, and is trying to control development in the whole area by strict controls on water use and restrictive zoning, though how well that will work against the opposition of many local officials remains to be seen.

In many cases provisions of land law have hindered efforts at conservation. Here, ironically, they may help it for a while. The reason is that many land titles in the Pine Barrens are confused. The land was thought to be of so little worth for so long that people were not always careful about conveyances. In New Jersey, unclear titles must be traced, if necessary, back to the colonial proprietors' corporations, the East Jersey Proprietors for East Jersey, the West Jersey Proprietors for West Jersey. If clear title cannot be proved, the property reverts to the appropriate proprietors. Occasionally one or the other corporation litigates over some orphan piece of land. In the case of the Pine Barrens, the propri-

tries, harvesting berries and sphagnum moss or guiding hunters, don't provide many jobs or taxes. Bog iron extraction, which once provided a lot of the country's iron, is a historical memory though there is talk of reviving it now that the Minnesota mines are down to less tractable ores. The prospect of a suburban tract or a baby Disneyland gladdens the hearts of many township committeemen.

The gladdening has a basis in reality these days that it did not have in years gone by. The suburbs of Philadelphia are pressing the western edges of the pines, the suburbs of New York have reached the northern limit. The pines can't be ignored any more. And there is now the vogue for retirement villages and sunset-age communities that don't have to be in reasonable commuting distance of anywhere. Furthermore, the Pine Barrens have immense resources of ground water — the estimates go to 17 trillion gallons. Not only is this coveted by thirsty communities elsewhere, it is an inducement to industries.

To meet the threat, both state and federal governments are accelerating their

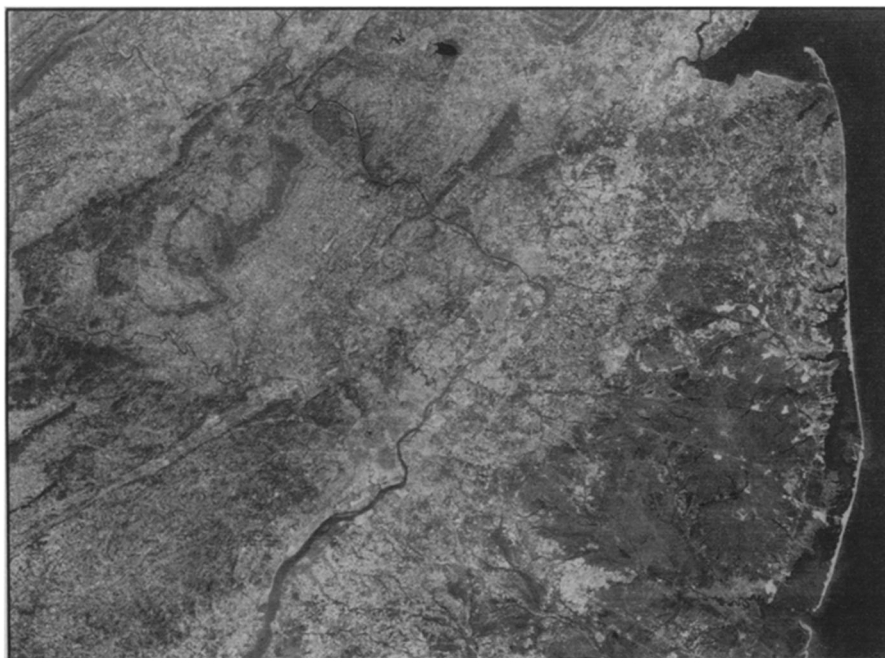


Bernard Fagan/Dept. of Interior

There are no 18-wheelers on this road.

etors could wind up litigating with each other: The boundary between their domains runs through the region, and its exact location is a matter of discussion. But even if the proprietors don't get into it, the suits and countersuits of people sniffing fortunes out of grandpa's useless acres could tie up a lot of the land for a long time.

But to get back to the scene described at the beginning. It was not in the Pine Barrens, but it was described for two reasons beyond pure nostalgia. First, it no longer exists. It was obliterated under a suburban housing tract. Second, it was something of a Potemkin village, or Potemkin forest, anyway. The reason for the locomotive shifting cars was the presence in those woods of several large industrial plants. The pond is an abandoned claypit. The whole thing is in the middle of a sizable industrial town. Yet the geese nested about ten trees away from a chemical factory, and an occasional deer could be seen, though not nearly so many as in the wilder areas of the Pine Barrens. It would be nice if the Pine Barrens could have no further development. They probably do not need as much development as just described, but selective development is possible without necessarily destroying all of nature. It's the slash-and-run technique of the suburban tract builder that really hurts. □



Pine Barrens show up at lower right in this satellite photo taken from 925 km up.