

Arto Monaco

'Mister Makebelieve' of the Adirondacks

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News
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UPPER JAY — From start to finish, everything fits.

When Arto Monaco dropped out of high school in the early 1930s, he could not possibly have imagined what lay in store for him: the patronage of Rockwell Kent, work as an artist at several Hollywood studios, the Army's Legion of Merit during World War II, his own toy factory, and a lasting legacy as the most prominent theme-park designer in the Adirondacks.

It was Arto's surprising, lifetime record of artistic endeavor and achievement that led a Canton-based arts organization, Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (or TAUNY for short), to present Monaco with one of its North Country Heritage Awards last month, making him an official "North Country Legend."

The story of Arto Monaco's life and career is too rich to be told in a single sitting, so we've broken it up into two parts. This week you'll read about Arto's childhood in Upper Jay, his discovery by illustrator Rockwell Kent, his brief career in Hollywood as a studio artist, his role in designing a German village in the California mountains for the Army during World War II, and his return to Upper Jay.

Next week we'll take a look at how Arto designed the Santa's

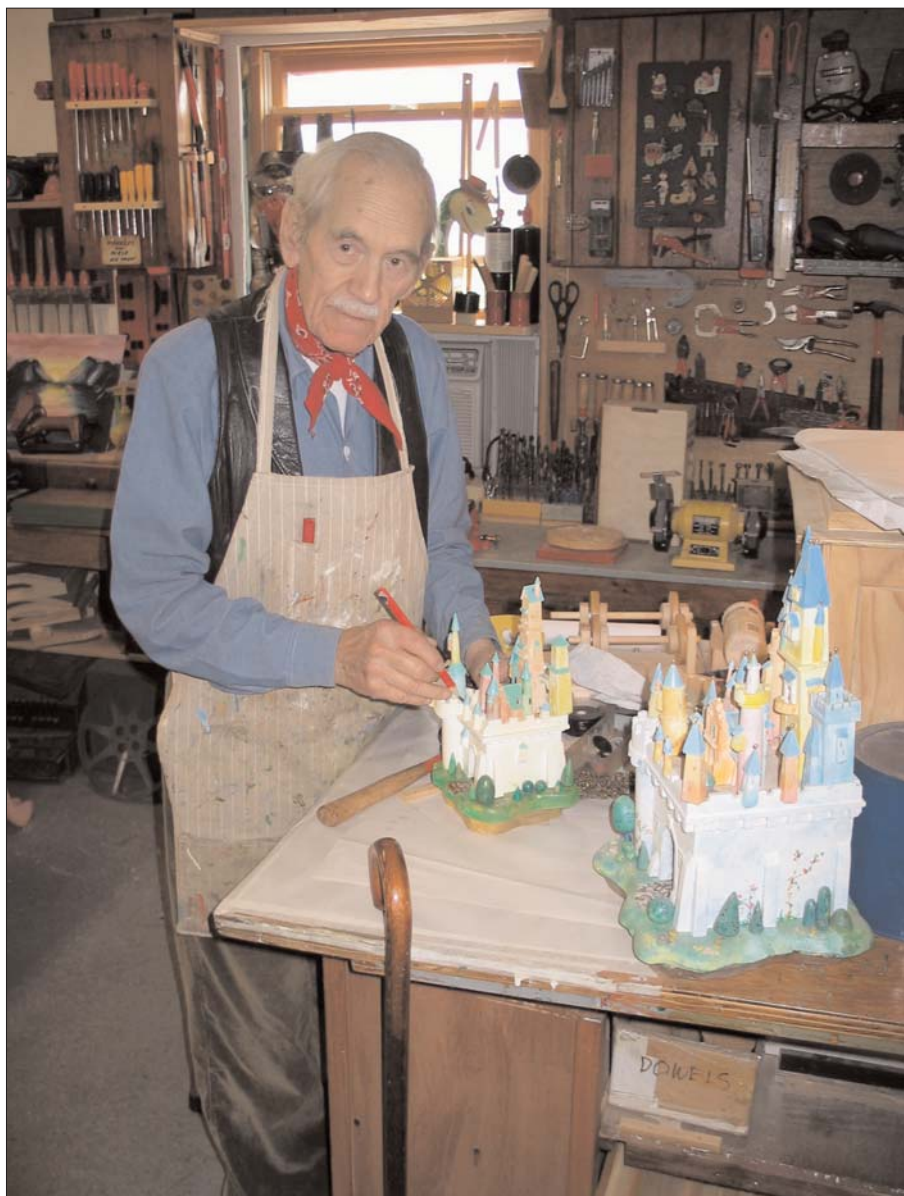
Workshop theme park, opened the Land of Makebelieve in his Upper Jay back yard, and continued working as an artist with a kid's heart even after repeated ice floods finally forced

Makebelieve to close in 1979.

ARTO MONACO'S father Louis came to America from Italy by himself when he was just 14 years old. Louie and his wife, the former Ida Martin, were living in her hometown of Elizabethtown when Arto was born on Nov. 15, 1913.

In 1921 they moved to Upper Jay, Louie having persuaded his boss, Victor Prime, to sell him a grocery store he owned there, the Parson's Store, for \$800.

"Mr. Prime wanted to know





Scale model of “Annadorf,” the Bavarian village Monaco built in the San Gabriel Mountains above Los Angeles as a training ground for soldiers preparing to invade Europe during World War II.

where Dad was going to get the money from,” Arto wrote 3 years ago in a short biography of his father, “and he said that he thought Mr. Prime would loan it to him.

“Mr. Prime said, ‘You know something, somebody that’s got the arrogance to ask him to sell him the store, then ask me for the money to pay for it — I am going to let you have it.’ “

Louie was quite an entrepreneur, opening a garage that catered to bootleggers, then a restaurant.

“Dad was funny — he was like a comedian. Directors, producers, movie stars and songwriters — a lot of well-known people came up for dinner at Louie’s,” Arto wrote. “They’d come at 6 o’clock at night, and they’d stay until 1 o’clock in the morning.”

ONE OF THOSE celebrity guests at Louie’s Restaurant was Rockwell Kent, probably the best-known illustrator of his day.

Kent lived on Asgaard Farm, outside Au Sable Forks, where he had his studio.

Arto, then in his mid-teens, had been put to work painting murals for his father’s eatery. Only one of his murals from that period still survive. It can still be seen through the window of the vacant storefront nearest to the

Main Street bridge on the south side of Au Sable Forks. The storefront once was Quirk’s soda fountain, then the Village Inn. All the people pictured were well-known local folk of the day.

“I was doing very poorly in school,” Arto recalled. “Rockwell Kent admired the murals that I had on the walls. I went down to see him one day, and Rockwell said that he thought that I could be an artist. I said that my father wanted me to be a lawyer, and my mother wanted me to be a doctor. I knew that I couldn’t take school any longer, and I wanted to quit. Rockwell talked to Dad and con-vinced him that I should be an artist.”

Through his network of friends, Kent got Arto enrolled at the Pratt Institute, a prestigious art school in Manhattan. Arto’s room and board cost \$15 a week; his tuition, \$120 a year (it’s \$22,196 for the current year).

While attending Pratt, a friend of Arto’s complained to him



Sgt. Arto Monaco, center with cigar, shares a beer and a joke with men from his U.S. Army Signal Corps Training Division unit in California during World War II.

about “having to go to the movies all day every Saturday,” Arto recalled in a recent interview. “I asked him what was wrong with that!”

Arto’s friend’s mother was a member of the Hays Committee, a moral watchdog that rated motion pictures, much like today’s Motion Picture Association of America.

“He took me to meet his mother. They wanted a younger person on the committee to even things out, so I got on,” Arto said.

For the next two years Monaco spent his Saturdays in a special screening room watching seven or eight movies every week.

“They’d give us these cards to fill out after each one, and for every one I’d write, ‘Great picture.’ I found something good in every one of them,” Arto said.

By the time Monaco graduated from Pratt in 1937, he was more than ready for a career as a studio artist in Hollywood.

MEMBERS OF the summer crowd that frequented Louie’s Restaurant in Upper Jay helped Arto find work in Tinseltown,



Robert Besanceney, of Buffalo, was 3 years old when he visited the Land of Make-believe during its opening season in August 1954.



The Castle and three storybook cottages at the Land of Makebelieve in the 1950s.

first at MGM, then at Warner Brothers, then Paramount, then Disney, then back at MGM, all in rapid succession. A nighttime drive through the desert ended several days later in Upper Jay.

“I was restless,” Arto explained with a shrug to Anne Mackinnon, a local writer, for a 2001 article in *Adirondack Life* magazine.

After another intervention from one of the summer-celebrity denizens of his father’s restaurant, Arto was asked over to a house in Jay where John Steinbeck and director Lewis Milestone were working on storyboards for “Of Mice and Men.”

The result: Arto went back to Hollywood and MGM, where he stayed until 1941. Having received a draft notice, Arto decided to enlist before his call-up date. Doing so would give him a little more leverage as to his assignment — or so he thought.

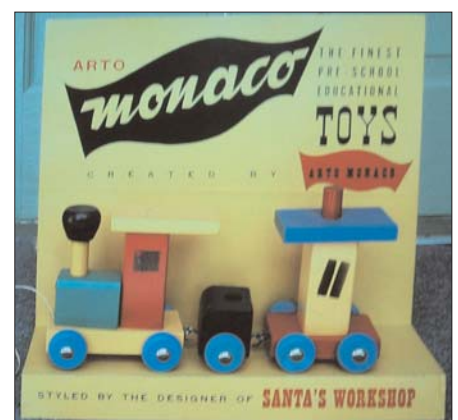
Arto ended up in boot camp on Long Island. He graduated to doing busywork at the Aberdeen

Proving Grounds in Maryland, according to Monaco biographer Mark Frost, editor of *The Chronicle*, a weekly newspaper published in Glens Falls — until one day when an NCO asked his unit if there was anyone who could paint a sign.

Arto raised his hand.

“I thought it was going to be something real important,” Arto recalled, “but it was just a sign telling people not to throw cigarette butts in the urinal.”

THOSE SIX “no butts” signs turned out to be more important than Arto thought. They brought his skills to the attention of a



lieutenant who had an idea about how to train more soldiers more quickly.

“One sergeant was teaching 25 men how to put a pistol together,” Monaco said, “but they needed him to train 100 men.”

Arto talked with the lieutenant, recalling the illustrations he’d seen in medical texts.

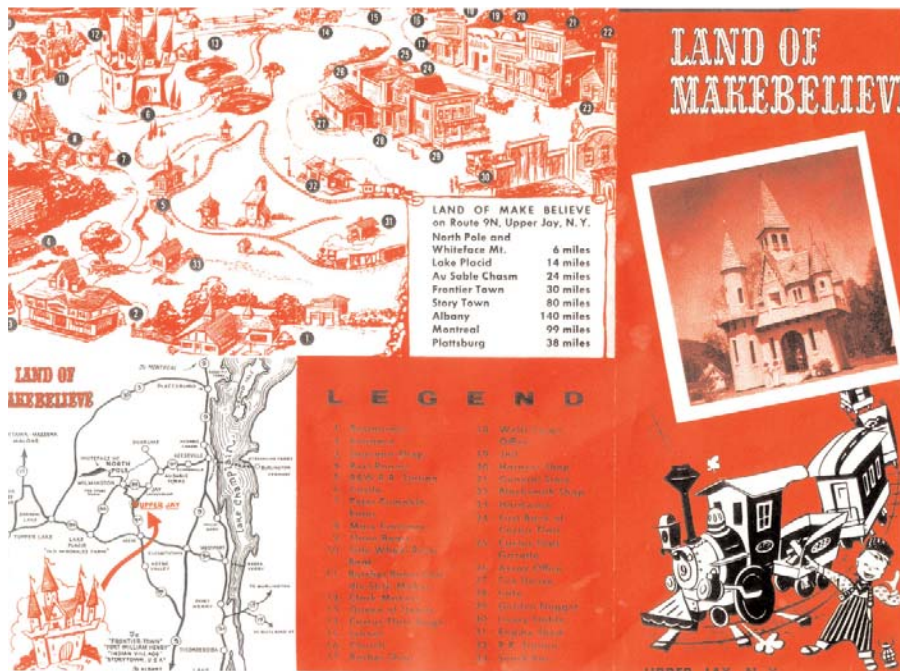
“Maybe we could do it that way, with charts and things,” Arto remembered saying.

That was the beginning of the Training Aids Division, which started with Monaco and one other man.

“That lieutenant was full of ideas,” Arto remembered. “He asked if we could make a .45 caliber pistol this big,” motioning with his arms to indicate a handgun about 3 feet long.

“Every day it was something great.”

Training Aids grew, little by little but steadily, until Arto had nearly 200 men working for him. Characteristically humble, Monaco claims that the only reason he was in charge was because “I was the first one in,”



but the leadership he continued to demonstrate for the rest of his life contradicts that.

In short order, Private Monaco was promoted to master sergeant, and his unit was transferred out to California, where they set up shop at Camp Santa Anita, formerly a horse track in the San Gabriel Valley outside Los Angeles.

With America fully involved in World War II, Training Aids had as much work as it could handle,

and more. Its biggest job was the design and construction of a Bavarian village in the San Gabriel Mountains where U.S. troops could train for the street fighting that would come once Germany was invaded.

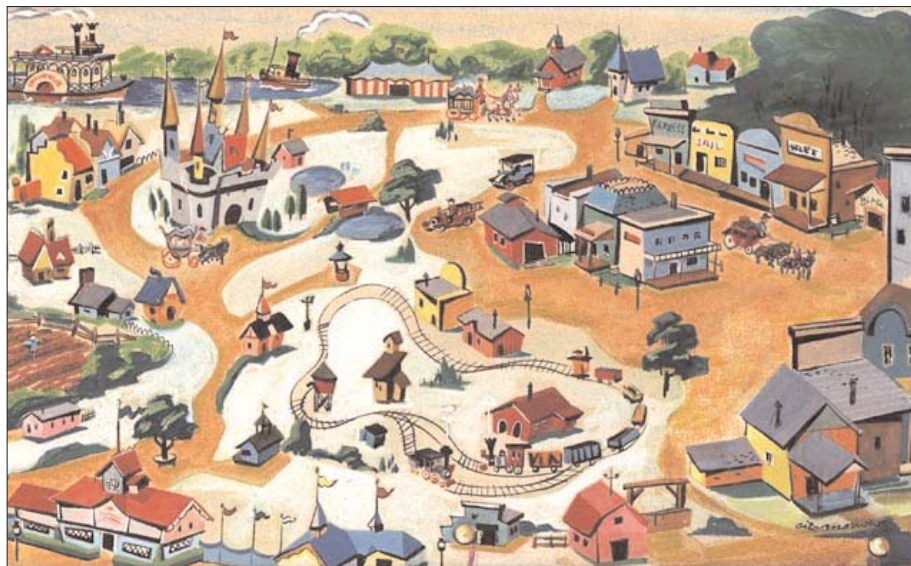
It was named Annadorf “after the daughter of one of the men who worked with me,” Monaco said. “He was low man on the totem pole, and it seemed like the right thing to do.”

When the war ended, Monaco was given the Army’s Legion of Honor for his leadership of the Training Aids Division.

And then, he was discharged.

“**ALL OF A** sudden, you’re on your own,” Arto recalled. “After a few years of the Army regulating every minute of your life, that’s a strange feeling.”

Monaco had returned to Upper Jay and was working for Rockwell Kent, as he had during college, when he received a telegram from his old colonel, Bill James, asking Arto to return



to California. James wanted him to take the skills he'd used in organizing the Annadorf project to refurbish a resort development in Lake Arrowhead.

"The place was like a Normandy village," Arto recalled. "They wanted me to redo it like a Swiss village."

The job done, Monaco came back again to Upper Jay.

"What I really wanted to do was put up something like Annadorf," Arto said, "at the Four Corners in Wilmington — but I didn't have the money. All I could afford was a restaurant."

Monaco built the Carousel restaurant, with a circular dining room, next to a gift shop for his wife. The Carousel later became the Gateway restaurant, which went out of business several years ago. It was recently refurbished as the Candyman's fudge factory and sales outlet.

Still restless, Arto took a design job with Ideal Toys in New York, but that didn't last long.

"I wasn't there 2 months, and I couldn't take that city life," Monaco said, "so I got my own toy business going."

"That's how Julian Reiss became interested in me."

ARTO SET UP a small factory in Upper Jay where he and his crew made simple, durable, colorful educational toys from wooden blocks for youngsters. That's where Julian Reiss, the man who came up with the idea for Santa's Workshop, came in 1949 to ask Monaco to design his new attraction.

"He described what he wanted

to do," Arto recalled, "and then he said, 'A lot of people would think this is crazy or foolish. What do you think about it?'"

"I told him, 'I think it's beautiful.' What flashed through my mind in that moment was Annadorf — that's why the North Pole looks like it does."

"But he was dressed pretty humbly — I mean, his shoes looked even worse than mine. I had to say to him, 'Well, Mr. Reiss, I don't mean to embarrass you, but this is going to cost a lot of money.'"

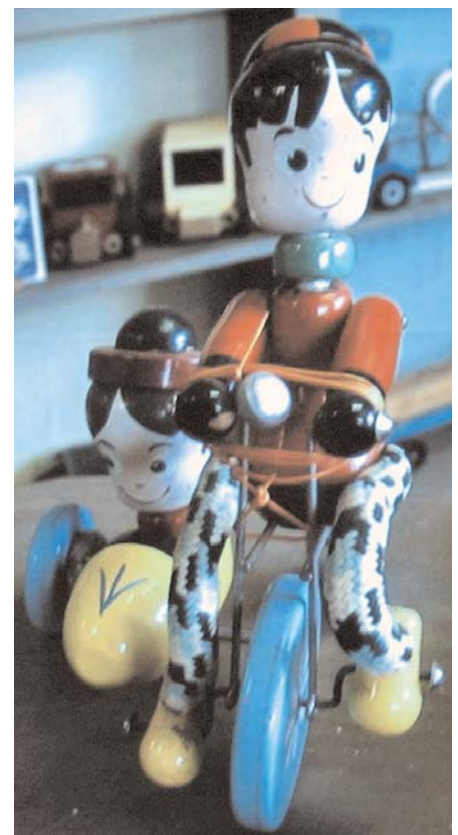
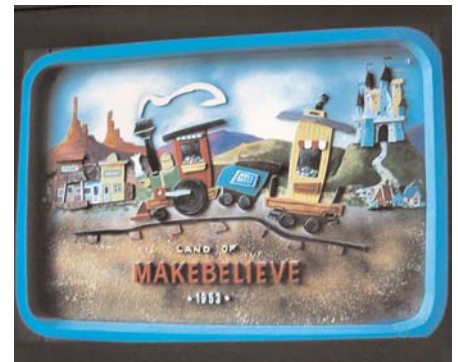
"He said, 'Well, don't worry about that; I can get it. I'll just take these drawings you've made down to New York and show them to my father.'"

"Mr. Reiss came back the next day and told me it was all settled — he'd talked to his father, and he would make the money available. He'd flown his own plane down there."

A few days later Arto, Julian Reiss and partner Harold Fortune were up on Fortune's tract in Wilmington, just below the toll-house for the Whiteface Memorial Highway.

"We didn't even have a tape measure," Monaco said. "We just put one foot in front of the other and walked off the dimensions for each building. We had the whole park laid out in 2 or 3 hours, and they were cutting timbers the next day. We had no electrical engineer, no permits — it was funny."

THOSE WERE the days when theme parks were sprouting up all over the eastern Adirondacks — and Arto was involved in





A light snow had fallen on the castle at the Land of Makebelieve when it came time to close on the last day of operations in October 1979

designing many of them.

Monaco designed a second, smaller attraction for Reiss on the outskirts of Lake Placid, Old McDonald's Farm. Though it stayed open only a few years, its buildings formed the core of a summer camp for underprivileged kids from New York City that's run today by the Julian Reiss Foundation.

The small-scale mill house that Arto designed as part of the entry gate to Old McDonald's Farm, now half a century old, can still be seen in the gully between the Tops grocery and Saranac Avenue.

By then Monaco had started thinking about opening up his very own park in Upper Jay. One

day he found himself talking about his idea with the father of Kay Cameron, one of his wife's friends, who was part owner of the J.&J. Rogers plant in Au Sable Forks.

"I told him I'd like to build a village for kids to play in," Arto said. "It would have very little that was commercial about it once the kids got in, just popcorn and soda pop for sale. That's why I never made any money — not that I ever needed money. I'm happy with what I have.

"Anyway, all of that rang true with Cameron — he hated those carnival-type places, selling all that junk every time you turned around. He said he'd pay to build the park, and he'd make me pres-

ident of the company with 51 percent of the stock. Two days later we were in the lawyer's office, drawing up the papers, and before you know it we'd started building."

"Every element bore Monaco's distinctive style," wrote Anne Mackinnon about Arto's Makebelieve architecture, "simultaneously perfect and 'a little bit cock-eyed.' The buildings especially were charming caricatures, their slightly exaggerated features — skewed rooflines, emphatic colors, the bric-a-brac of hand-cut shingles — somehow truer than any literal translation."

After toying with another name for his new theme park, Monaco settled on calling it the Land of Makebelieve. It had a castle, a set of fairytale houses, a riverboat, a train and stagecoach, a miniature town straight out of the Old West, even a fleet of cars the kids could drive around the park — and all of it was scaled to the size of the park's young clientele, between 1:2 to 3:4 scale.

The children were encouraged to dress up in costumes and play to their heart's content — and their parents were urged to stay out of the kids' way.

"Don't say 'Hands Off,' " read a sign placed prominently at the entrance to the Land of Makebelieve, "don't say 'Don't Touch,' cause no one here forbids, so put your paws on anything — we built this place for kids."

"Arto always said that every child's dreams should contain magic castles," observed Bob Reiss, Julian's son, at the

TAUNY award program last month in Canton. “That’s why he made the Land of Makebelieve. (Arto) didn’t make his art to make money; he made it to make kids happy.

“Arto had no children of his own, but to every child in the (Au Sable) Valley he was their Uncle Arto, who had the coolest back yard ever.”

Indeed, the children of Upper Jay were given their own secret entrance to the Land of Makebelieve, where they could go play whenever they wanted — for free.

‘THOSE WHO had the good fortune to visit the Land of Makebelieve while it was still open got a treat they’d never get anywhere else,” Reiss told the crowd in Canton, reminding them that Arto’s theme park had been forced to close down in 1979.

The Land of Makebelieve stood just a few dozen yards back from a very shallow stretch of the Au Sable River. The North Country winter froze that river hard most years. When spring came and the ice broke upstream, it jammed in the Upper Jay shallows. That ice dam pushed the waters of the Au Sable River out

of its banks to cover the nearby flats, including the field where Monaco’s theme park was built.

In the 25 spring thaws between 1954 and 1979, the Land of Makebelieve was flooded 11 times. The last flood was the one that finally did the park in. So powerful was the partly frozen stream that ran through Arto’s back yard that it lifted the park’s office from its foundations, carrying it about 1,500 feet before setting it back down and crushing it.

“The Land of Makebelieve didn’t close because it wasn’t doing a good business,” Monaco



The remains of Cactus Flats in September 2003. What had once been Arto’s own small-scale Western town had become a private Western ghost town standing amidst the scrub brush in his back yard — an idea that did not completely displease him.

told Derek Muirden of Mountain Lake PBS while taping a 1993 documentary. “It went out at the top of its glory. We went out because Mother Nature said, ‘That’s it, Arto.’ ”

Looking around the grounds with Muirden at the remains of Cactus Flats, his child-sized Western town, Arto said, “I’ll probably restore some of these buildings — I don’t know what for.”

Ten years later, however, a nearly 90-year-old Arto Monaco seemed to have resolved himself to the demise of the Land of Makebelieve.

“The Land of Makebelieve is a place that once was,” he said in a recent interview, “and it will never be again. It lives only in the hearts and minds of those who loved it.”

ARTO HAS BEEN far from idle in the nearly quarter century since the Land of Makebelieve closed. He has illustrated some 17 books and he’s kept making games and toys, the most intricate of them as gifts for his nephew and niece or friends around the Adirondacks — and, sometimes, just because he feels like it. Many of his toys are kept in the private museum he has constructed inside the old shop at the Land of Makebelieve, next door to his home.

Monaco has also kept his hand in the theme-park game, helping out his friend Charlie Wood with designs and artwork for his various ventures — Storytown, Gaslight Village and the Great Escape, where many of the fairytale buildings from the Land of Makebelieve ended up after the

1979 flood.

Arto has continued giving of himself to children. Samples of his whimsical furniture can be found in the children’s sections of the public libraries in Upper Jay and Au Sable Forks.

About 10 years ago, Wood and actor-philanthropist Paul Newman roped Arto into painting a huge mural around the indoor swimming pool of their new camp for critically ill children, the Double “H” Hole-in-the-Woods Ranch in Lake Luzerne.

More recently, local developer Mickey Danielle persuaded

Monaco to design a new children’s camp in Jay for a foundation that had been established by Danielle’s daughter to help the families of children with growth disorders.

“Arto, you’ve made a lot of people happy over the years,” observed Derek Muirden a few years ago in a second PBS documentary, “Return to the Land of Makebelieve.”

“Mostly I made myself happy,” Arto replied, “and how many people do you know who spent their lives doing just what they wanted to do?”



Arto Monaco at his 90th birthday party, at the Wells Memorial Library in Upper Jay, on Saturday, Nov. 15, 2003. A few days later he was admitted to the hospital. He died the next Friday, Nov. 21, with his family by his side.