

Santanoni

A Japanese retreat in the rustic Adirondacks

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, October 31, 2003

NEWCOMB — Once upon a time, a boy from Albany accompanied his father on a long, long journey to the ancient kingdom of Nippon, far across the sea.

The boy's name was Robert C. Pruyn, or Bertie for short.

It was 1862 when Bertie's father, Robert Hewson Pruyn, was sent to Japan as Abraham Lincoln's second

ambassador to the Land of the Rising Sun, a country that had been opened to the West just 8 years before by Commodore Perry. The young Bertie spent a year with his father in Edo (now known as Tokyo), living in the priest's quarters of a temple.

That experience remained with Pruyn all his life.

Thirty years later, when Pruyn

began buying up land in the wilds of the Adirondacks outside Newcomb in southern Essex County, he and Manhattan architect (and college roommate) Robert H. Robertson took a truly unique approach to designing the buildings on what would later become the Santanoni Preserve, named for the mountain peak in whose shadow the curious Great Camp was established.

Using native materials, local craftsmen, and building techniques already proven in the construction of hunting and logging camps throughout the Adirondack forest, Pruyn and Robertson designed structures reflecting the Japanese temples and Imperial retreats that had so impressed themselves upon young Bertie.

Camp Santanoni stayed in the Pruyn family for many years, serving as a retreat for guests like then-Governor Teddy Roosevelt. Pruyn



Paul Malo painted this watercolor from architectural drawings to show the Japanese "ho-o-den" form of the Main Lodge at Camp Santanoni, stretched out like a phoenix on the shore, poised to take wing over Newcomb Lake.

established a model farm on the preserve, more for the challenge than for its agricultural production. Following the 1929 stock market collapse, Robert Pruyn fell ill and Santanoni entered a long period of decline, though still used by Pruyn's heirs through the 1940s.

In 1953 the preserve was bought by Myron and Crandall Melvin of Syracuse, who methodically restored many of Santanoni's historic buildings. A tragedy involving a young Melvin relative in 1972, however, led the family to abandon the property. In cooperation with the Nature Conservancy, the Melvins conveyed the estate into the hands of the people of New York.

For nearly 20 years after its acquisition by the state, the future of Camp Santanoni remained uncertain.

In 1990, a group of preservationists formed an organization called Adirondack Architectural Heritage — called AARCH (pronounced like “arch”) for short — whose first goal was to secure recognition for Santanoni as a historic district within the state's Forest Preserve.

Governor Mario Cuomo finally signed on to the preservation of Santanoni in the fall of 1991. A state unit management plan was developed that classified the areas around the Great Camp's architectural core and experimental farm as historic sites, thus allowing for the preservation of structures within the Forest Preserve. AARCH has taken on the task of restoring and interpreting the camp for visitors in partnership with the town of Newcomb and the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Today 8,000 to 10,000 visitors pass through Santanoni each year. AARCH conducts monthly tours of Santanoni's historic structures throughout the summer, but visitors are welcome to hike or ski the 9.8-mile round trip from the gatehouse, located just off the main highway through Newcomb, whenever they

like. The camp has become a favorite destination for cross-country ski trips sponsored each winter by the nearby Adirondack Park Visitors Interpretive Center as well as the Adirondack Mountain Club.

The Gate Lodge

We visited Camp Santanoni earlier this month on what turned out to be the first chilly weekend of autumn. A light rain fell throughout the day, but the dozen guests who'd gathered under the arched entryway of the preserve's Gate Lodge for a tour by Steven Engelhart, AARCH's executive director, were dressed for the weather.

The Gate Lodge, Engelhart explained, was one of the last structures to be built on the Santanoni Preserve. Erected in 1905, it was one of the earliest projects of the architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich, which later went on to prominence for the country homes they designed on Long Island. For this job, however, they were chosen primarily for their sensitivity to the natural surroundings.

The primary feature of the stone

lodge is its entry arch, covered by a steep-peaked roof.

“All the traffic into Santanoni was directed through this monumental arch,” Engelhart said of the structure above him, which was sheltering the tour group from the rain.

“When this was built, visitors to Santanoni would have taken the railroad from Albany to North Creek, where they were picked up by a horse-drawn coach for an 11- or 12-hour ride over the rough Carthage Road,” Engelhart said. “This arch was meant to say to them, ‘You have arrived’ — even though they still had a ride ahead of them of nearly 5 miles to the Main Camp.”

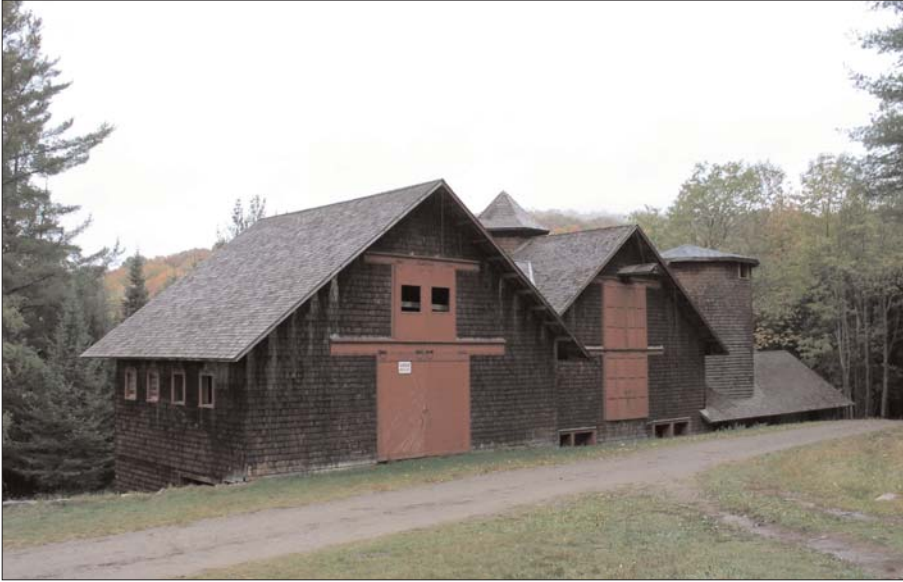
“Arrived,” indeed!

The farm complex

The walk up the main carriage road through the Santanoni Preserve was a particularly lovely one, even in the early October chill of a light rain. Soon, however, the woods lining either side of the road opened up, and before us stood the core of Bertie Pruyn's experimental farm complex: a large, shingled, three-level barn to



The Gate Lodge.



the right, a stone creamery to the left, and three houses for Santanoni's farm workers behind it on a gently rising hill.

The large, shingled barn, built in 1895, is a thing of beauty in itself. No longer standing are the outbuildings once found behind it, housing chickens, pigs and geese around an open courtyard.

In the lowest level of the barn, looking out to the rear at ground level, can still be found an array of 15 small stalls for dairy cattle, equipped for cleanliness as well as the animals' comfort. The small Jersey cows stood not on concrete, but on beds made from cork bricks.

Engelhart recounted a story told to one of AARCH's resident summer interns by a very elderly Rowena Ross Putnam, daughter of Santanoni herdsman George Ross, when she returned once as a visitor to the preserve.

"As a girl it had been lonely for Rowena, living way out here in the forest," Engelhart said. "She told our intern about how she would strap on a pair of roller skates on a rainy day like this and skate on the concrete around and around the cattle stalls, making up a song as she skated that included the names of all the cows, touching each one of them as she named them.

"That's one of the neat things about operating a site like this," Engelhart continued, "getting to know so many of the people who were once associated with the farm and the preserve.

"The family of Charlie Petoff, Santanoni's head gardener, comes here every year for a reunion, and they have told us about the fairly exotic foods he grew here for the Pruyns: cantaloupes, melons, things you wouldn't normally expect to grow in this climate. He took great pride, his descendants say, in working that kind of magic.

"I would like to think that, one day, all of these buildings would be restored, and they would be interpreted by the descendants of those who



Three of the five buildings comprising the Santanoni Farm Complex (top to bottom): the cow barn, the creamery, and the gardener's cottage.

lived and worked here,” Engelhart said.

Pruyn’s experimental farm was developed with the idea of making the Santanoni Preserve a self-sufficient retreat in the depths of the Adirondack forest. This “self-sufficient” farm, however, cost Pruyn anywhere between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year to operate, above and beyond any income it generated and the value of the goods it produced for the Pruyn family.

High Peaks ho-o-den

From the core of the experimental farm it was another 3 or 4 miles’ walk up the carriage road, surrounded by woods, to the Main House at Santanoni, perched on the shore of Newcomb Lake.

“Perched” is a uniquely appropriate word for the way the Pruyn villa stands above the lake, for Camp Santanoni’s Main House was designed as an Adirondack version of the classical Japanese “ho-o-den,” a palace whose ground plan conforms to the shape of a bird in flight. The name itself means “villa (den) of the phoenix (ho-o).”

A ho-o-den is a group of buildings linked by covered walkways. Pruyn’s Adirondack ho-o-den, the Main House at Santanoni, is a group of six log buildings made into one by the broad, open porch surrounding and containing them.

The porches are as much a part of the house as are the separate buildings those porches draw together. The combined area of all six buildings and porches measures nearly 11,000 square feet — about 5,000 square feet of which is just the porches.

This was a house that was built as a base for enjoying the outdoors.

“Other camps had great dining rooms, or bowling lawns or alleys, or even ballrooms,” Engelhart said as our group sat together on the Santanoni porch, looking out over Newcomb Lake. “Mostly people came here, though, to be outdoors.”

If the Pruyn family photo albums are any indication, the Santanoni visitor’s experience of a century ago was one of “gaiety, hilarity,” Engelhart observed, “especially for women. This was a place where they could be rid of some of the Victorian restrictions that hemmed them in so in ‘polite society.’”

Today, Santanoni is quietly impressive, a piece of the Adirondack past that’s been rescued from neglect and decay.

“We’ve just spent \$120,000 on an architectural survey of the entire property,” Engelhart told the tour group. “We have drawings of everything, and we know what kind of work needs to be done to restore the buildings still standing.”

Last fall, AARCH received a \$92,000 grant from the New York state Environmental Protection Fund, about half of what the group needs to complete the restoration work already begun on the Main Camp boathouse on Newcomb Lake.

“What’s ahead will take \$2 million to \$3 million to bring it up to a reasonable point,” Engelhart said, “and

at the pace we’ve been going, it will take forever! Realistically, though, we have about a decade’s work still ahead of us.”

THOSE WHO want to read up on Camp Santanoni before their visit are encouraged to buy “Santanoni: From Japanese Temple to Life at an Adirondack Great Camp.” The 234-page paperback coffee-table book, filled with photographs, tells the story of how this unique camp was built and how AARCH and other preservationists joined forces to ensure its survival. Published by AARCH in 2000, the book retails for \$24.95 at local bookstores, or you can buy it directly from Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

AARCH was formed in 1990 to promote better understanding, appreciation and stewardship of the unique architectural heritage of the Adirondacks through education, action and advocacy. With offices in the Keeseville Civic Center at 1790 Main St., its telephone number is (518) 834-9328, and its Web site address is www.aarch.org.



A portion of the Main Lodge complex of cabins, joined by a network of porches.