

# The AARCH Top Five

A tour of endangered Adirondack historic architecture — the second in a two-part series

by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, March 10, 2003

In last week's issue, we started a tour of one very special aspect of the Adirondacks: its endangered historic architecture.

We visited the Ames farmhouse in Ray Brook (pre-1847), Keeseville's original Baptist church (1825) and a beautiful stone grist mill in Willsboro (1810, 1843).

This week, we'll complete the tour with visits to a classic Adirondack lodge and one of the region's best-known children's theme parks.

The sites on our tour were chosen from Adirondack Architectural Heritage's latest list of endangered regional architecture.

Since 1994, AARCH has maintained a running list of important historic and architectural landmarks that are in danger of being lost if something isn't done soon to save them. To be considered for the list, a property must meet certain criteria:

- It must be located inside the Adirondack Park's Blue Line.
- It must be historically or architecturally significant, though it need not necessarily be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- The continued existence and integrity of the property must be seriously threatened.

In addition, properties are often chosen because they are illustrative of important regional, state or national preservation issues, such as the widespread loss of historic bridges, or the abandonment of churches due to the declining size of many congregations.

## **Aiden Lair, Minerva twp.**

The next-to-the-last stop on our tour of endangered historic Adirondack architecture is Aiden Lair, in Minerva township.

To get there from the Northway, take Exit 29 and turn west onto the

Boreas/Blue Ridge Road, then watch for the signs directing you toward Minerva. Once you hit state Route 28N, turn left. You'll see Aiden Lair after about 7.5 miles, on your left: a square, three-story, shingle-sided, boarded-up building with a semicircular driveway in front leading off and back onto 28N.

A state historical marker stands in front of the lodge to memorialize then-Vice President Teddy Roosevelt's "midnight ride" in 1901 from the Tahawus Club in Newcomb to the North Creek railroad station upon the death of President William McKinley.

Aiden Lair's owner, Mike Cronin, was known forever after that night as the man who drove TR's wagon on the final leg of his journey to the presidency. Local legend has it that Cronin later sold or gave away dozens of horseshoes, all of them ostensibly thrown by one of his

horses during that wild, nighttime drive to North Creek.

Several stories have circulated about the origins of Aiden Lair's name. Recent owners had it that the name means "haven of rest" in the Scottish dialect.

Local newspapers published at the turn of the 20th century, however, reported that the name had been given to the area by former Essex County Clerk Edmond Williams. Colonel Williams had retired to a cabin he built there, naming the environs Aiden Lair ("a place for wild beasts") for the wildlife that abounded thereabouts.

Aiden Lair Lodge founder Mike Cronin, a Glens Falls native, had dropped a prospective law career after marrying Lil Butler, daughter of the owners of the Sagamore Hotel in Long Lake. After spending a few years helping manage the Sagamore, Cronin and



The lodge at Aiden Lair, rebuilt on the east side of the Minerva-Newcomb road after a 1914 fire burned the original structure on the opposite side of the road, now abandoned and vulnerable.

his wife had bought the land for a lodge at Aiden Lair in 1893, which they built on the west side of the road between Newcomb and Minerva.

On Sunday, May 17, 1914, fire consumed the Cronin's home and livelihood.

"The fire was discovered about two o'clock in the afternoon by the little Cronin children as they were at play in the yard," read the front-page news story in the Ticonderoga Sentinel. "They ran to their mother and told her that smoke was coming from the roof. Mrs. Cronin immediately hurried upstairs and found that the second and third floors were in flames and filled with smoke.

"News of the fire was telephoned to Minerva and a motor truck, carrying fifty men, at once started for Aiden Lair to fight the flames, but before their arrival the hotel was doomed, and they confined their work to saving the various outbuildings."

Mike Cronin, hospitalized for an unrelated malady at the time of the fire, died just a month after the fire. His family, however, soldiered on in the hospitality business, building a new home across the road that was eventually expanded in at least three stages to the size of the lodge standing there today.

Mike and Lil Cronin's only son Arthur and maiden daughter Rose helped their mother manage the hotel for four decades. When Lil died in 1954, followed by Arthur in 1956 and Rose in 1960, the lodge at Aiden Lair went into a rapid decline.

A Cronin family reunion picnic at Minerva Lake in July 1994 inspired Mike Cronin's grandson, Bob Morrison, to take

one more stab at reviving Aiden Lair.

Boarded up for nearly 30 years, vandalized countless times, the lodge needed immediate attention. Morrison rallied local volunteers to help him — but, after a few years, he found that he could not sustain the effort.

"The building's not in very good shape," admitted Minerva historian Nancy Shaw last year. "It will eventually have to be torn down, probably."

According to AARCH director Steven Engelhart, that's exactly what the property's new owners plan to do.

If you don't get a look at Aiden Lair this winter, you may have missed your last chance to do so.

### Land of Makebelieve, Upper Jay

The last stop on our tour of endangered Adirondack architecture is the Land of Makebelieve, a former children's amusement park in Upper Jay. To get there from Aiden Lair, head back the way you came on Route 28N, then right on the Boreas/Blue Ridge Road to the Northway.

Go north one exit, to Exit 30, and head northwest through Keene Valley to Keene. There, you will take the right fork onto Route 9N to Upper Jay.

The former site of the Land of Makebelieve can be seen through a fence on Trumbull's Corners Road, the last right-hand turn before arriving at the Upper Jay bridge across the Au Sable River.

Please note, however, that the LOMB site is on private property and is definitely *not* open to the public today.

Through the fence, you may be able to see what appears to be a 1:2-scale

Western ghost town, the remains of the Cactus Flats section of the LOMB.

Looking a little bit farther, you may see the tip of some kind of structure rising from the surrounding brush and pines. It's the top of the highest turret of a fairy-tale castle made just for kids that once was the centerpiece of the Land of Makebelieve.

The LOMB was the creation of Arto Monaco, a local man trained at the Pratt Institute who worked in Hollywood as a set designer for several years before World War II. A protege of famed illustrator/painter Rockwell Kent, Monaco returned to Upper Jay after the war, designing the Santa's Workshop theme park on Whiteface Mountain in 1949, then Old McDonald's Farm outside Lake Placid in 1951.

Monaco opened the Land of Makebelieve in 1954. Monaco later described the conversation he had with his primary financier, explaining the theme park's concept to him:

"I told him I'd like to build a village for kids to play in. 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."

"Every element [of the Land of Makebelieve] bore Monaco's distinctive style," wrote Anne Mackinnon about Arto's unique architectural vision, "simultaneously perfect and 'a little bit cock-eyed.' The buildings were charming caricatures, their slightly exaggerated features — skewed rooflines, emphatic colors, the bric-a-brac of hand-



The Land of Makebelieve's "Cactus Flats" section: At left, in the 1950s, during the peak of the park's popularity. At right, abandoned and overgrown in September 2003, a 1:2 scale Western ghost town in the Adirondacks.

cut shingles — somehow truer than any literal translation.”

A sign at the gate read, “Don’t say ‘Hands Off,’ don’t say ‘Don’t Touch,’ ’cause no one here forbids — so put your paws on anything, we built this place for kids.”

Arto Monaco loved kids, and kids loved his Land of Makebelieve — and so did their parents.

Thousands of people visited the LOMB each summer, from 1954 through 1979. Traffic coming into Upper Jay from both directions was bumper-to-bumper between Keene and the Wilmington Notch. Locals say that, even now, more than a quarter century after the Makebelieve gates were closed for the last time, people still knock on the

doors of Upper Jay residences, asking where the children’s theme park is.

The theme park’s location, charming as it was, ultimately did it in. A succession of Au Sable River floods washed through the grounds, year after year, forcing Monaco to rebuild time after time. In 1979, he called it quits.

Arto lived for many years after that, however, designing toys, painting murals and assisting with the design of several more northeastern theme parks. He died in December 2003, just a few days after his 90th birthday.

“It’s still hard to believe he’s not with us any more,” said Engelhart shortly after Monaco’s death, “but in addition to losing him, I think the really unfortunate reality is that people like him, with

such child-centered playfulness and imagination, are an increasingly rare breed — and yet we need them more than ever.”

An organization called the Arto Monaco Historical Society has formed to preserve the toymaker’s artistic legacy. Initially, they had hoped to begin restoring the castle at the Land of Makebelieve in time for the 50th anniversary of the park’s opening, but that was not to be.

Today, the group is focusing on gathering photographs of Monaco’s life and inventorying surviving examples of his toys — but, down the road, if time does not take the castle and Cactus Flats first, they hope to gather the resources needed to save them, too.



Arto Monaco’s fairytale castles became his trademark. Above, the Land of Makebelieve castle, 1950s. Below, on the last day of the theme park’s operation, October 1979. Right, overgrown and disintegrating, September 2003.

