

Hello, Santanoni — Goodbye, winter

LPN reporter's final winter 2006 trek was a nordic ski outing to historic Camp Santanoni in Newcomb

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, March 17, 2005

My final winter outing of 2006 was just about as good as it gets: a nordic ski trek on a gentle carriage path through the woods to a historic Great Camp on Newcomb Lake.

I knew my destination, Camp Santanoni, fairly well. I had visited the historic district three times before: once with a tour group on a rainy October day, once on a summer bike ride with my family, and once with a historic-preservation expert to discuss the future of the site.

I had never, however, visited Santanoni alone — and I had never skied in, either, though I've long known that the trail is quite popular among nordic enthusiasts.

In November, I drew up a list of winter outings I wanted to write about. Unfortunately, our winter weather this season has been spotty, at best. By the time March arrived, I still had a dozen ideas to pursue, but not much ice-and-snow time left.

One of my top two choices was a ski or snowshoe hike across the narrow strait separating Valcour Island from the Adirondack coast. Champlain ice, however, was late to form this year, at least on the New York side, making an island journey too risky.

That left Santanoni, a final option that ultimately made me very happy indeed.

FIRST, a little history.

In 1862, a young boy from Albany traveled with his father to live for a year in Tokyo.

Thirty years later that boy,

Albany banker Robert C. Pruyn, began designing a wilderness retreat in rural Newcomb township for his family. Working with his college roommate, Manhattan architect Robert H. Robertson, Pruyn laid out plans for something really extraordinary: a rustic Japanese palace in the middle of the woods, an Adirondack “ho-o-den.”

The classical Japanese ho-o-den is an architectural form made up of numerous buildings linked together by covered walkways.

Pruyn's ho-o-den 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 Santanoni's Main Lodge as are the separate buildings they 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 is a house that was designed to be a base for enjoying the outdoors.

The ho-o-den's ground plan is laid out in such a way that, were one to see the ho-o-den from the air, it would look like a bird whose wings were extended in flight. The name itself means “villa (den) of the phoenix (ho-o).”

From the ground, it's difficult to envision the phoenix's form in Camp Santanoni. Architect Paul Malo, however, painted a watercolor of the Great Camp based on architectural drawings. Malo's painting, “Phoenix Ascending,”



“Phoenix Ascending,” a watercolor by architectural historian Paul Malo, shows Santanoni's Main Camp complex from the air, its wings and tail extended like those of a bird on the wing.



shows the Main Lodge stretched out like a great bird on the shore, wings and tail feathers extended, poised to take flight over Newcomb Lake.

If you keep that image in mind when you visit Santanoni, you will better appreciate, I think, what a remarkable structure it is.

PRUYN and his family continued visiting Camp Santanoni through the 1940s. In 1953, it was sold to Myron and Crandall Melvin, of Syracuse, who methodically restored many of the camp’s historic buildings.

After a young Melvin relative was lost on the estate in 1972, however, the family abandoned the property. In cooperation with the Nature Conservancy, the Melvins conveyed the property into the hands of the people of New York.

For the next two decades, preservationists and wilderness advocates battled over the fate of Santanoni.

Finally, in 1991, the state decided that, rather than tear down Santanoni so that the land could return to wilderness, it would preserve the Great Camp’s unique structures in the state Forest Preserve’s first historic district.

Today, that district is administered by a partnership of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the town of

Newcomb, and Adirondack Architectural Heritage, a nonprofit preservation organization based in Keeseville.

THE TRAIL to Robert Pruy’s ho-o-den on Newcomb Lake starts at the Santanoni gatehouse complex, on Lake Harris. The gatehouse, with its beautiful stone-arched carriage entrance, was built in 1905.

On a tour a couple of years ago, Adirondack Architectural Heritage Executive Director Steven Engelhart described the significance

of the gatehouse arch:

“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.

“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.”

Starting at the gatehouse, the 4.9-mile carriage-road trail to Newcomb Lake ascends at a very gentle pace. Combined with the graded roadbed and the daily trail grooming by DEC staff, that makes the Santanoni trail one of the most pleasant cross country ski experiences in the Adirondacks — and it’s free!

The journey from the gatehouse to Santanoni’s experimental farm complex, a mile into the woods, was a surprisingly quick one; I was actually a little startled when the woods opened out into the clearing containing the farm’s remaining struc-



The porches of Santanoni’s Main Lodge, in winter.

tures: three modest wooden houses and a single-story stone building.

The stone creamery stands opposite the place where a beautiful, shingle-sided barn once stood. The barn burned on July 13, 2004; all that's left are the stone foundation walls and the twisted remnants of the dairy's cattle pens.

Engelhart tells a story about Rowena Ross, the daughter of Santanoni herdsman George Ross, who lived on the farm complex long ago.

"As a girl, it had been lonely for Rowena, living way out here in the forest," Engelhart said. "Many years later, when Rowena came here to visit, she told one of our interns about how she would strap on a pair of roller skates on a rainy day 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."

If you use your imagination, you can almost hear that little girl's ghostly song echoing through the



The Gatehouse Lodge at Camp Santanoni

years as you stand by the empty pit where Santanoni's barn once stood, Rowena Ross naming the cows that used to live there.

LEAVING the farm complex, the trail continues its gentle climb through the silent woods, barren trees rising from the deep snow cov-

ering the hills.

About 2.3 miles from the gatehouse, you reach a fork in the trail. To the left is an old road leading to Moose Pond, about 4.5 miles away; to the right, the path to Newcomb Lake and the Main Lodge.

The path keeps climbing for another mile, though not so steeply as to be problem — in fact, with the even grade and the excellent grooming, I found myself almost gliding up the carriage road.

When the trail finally begins to descend, about 3.3 miles from the trailhead, it is a very gradual descent — enough to allow you to push off and coast for long stretches, but not so steep as to be dangerous.

It was on this long stretch between the farm complex and Newcomb Lake that I really started getting into this nordic hike. Similarly, it was the long, unbroken stretch between the Main Lodge and the former barn site that gave me time to really *experience* the trek.

There is a "zen" to skiing Santanoni.

Rhythmically you push, like a



The Creamery in the Santanoni Farm Complex



The Artist's Studio, seen from the lake

skater, first with one boot, then the other.

You also push, in counter-rhythm, with your poles.

Your breathing falls into sync with the rhythm of your arms and legs.

I wouldn't be surprised if your heartbeat, even your metabolic rate don't somehow develop sympathetic, complementary rhythms, too.

Taken all together, these various rhythms make of the Santanoni skiing experience a complex, sophisticated, organic "harmony."

It's long, smooth, unbroken stretches like the Santanoni carriage trail that give you the cumulative time for that experience to build up and break over you, like a long, slow wave built up over many miles of open sea that finally breaks just off shore.

There's no two ways about it: This is a great trail.

Keep it in mind and, when the first good snow falls next winter, hit the road to Newcomb and get yourself some Santanoni.

You won't regret it.

More information

For the complete story of Camp Santanoni's construction and preservation, get a copy of Adirondack Architectural Heritage's book,

"Santanoni: From Japanese Temple to Life at an Adirondack Great Camp," by Robert Engel, Howard Kirschenbaum and Paul Malo. (Paperback, 8.5 by 11 inches, 234 pages. Indexed. Illustrated with B&W photos, drawings and maps. \$24.95)

Visit Adirondack Architectural Heritage on its Web site at aarch.org.

Santanoni trail mileage

0.0 miles — Gatehouse trailhead; trail gently ascends, 3.2 miles

1.0 miles — Farm complex

2.3 miles — Fork in the road: left to Moose Pond (4.5 miles), right to Santanoni Main Camp and Newcomb Lake

3.3 miles — Trail begins gentle descent

3.9 miles — Junction, loop trail around Newcomb Lake

4.6 miles — Bridge across Newcomb Lake

4.9 miles — Main Camp



The Pump House, on Lake Newcomb, with its birch-bark siding recently restored.